



# What is the problem of inequality, and can we solve it?

## Participatory theatre and SDG10

Kelly Freebody<sup>1</sup>

The University of Sydney

### Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to consider how, if at all, participatory theatre serves the Sustainable Development Goal number 10: Reducing Inequality (SDG10). The paper draws on policy analysis methodology *What's the Problem Represented to be?* (Bacchi 2009) to critically consider how *inequity* as a solvable social and/or economic problem is represented by SDG10. I then draw on two previous research projects, one conducted by myself and colleagues (2018) and one conducted by Masso-Guijarro and colleagues (2021) that explicitly explore how scholarship in participatory theatre orient to social change agenda to understand how participatory theatre represents the problem of inequality and how, if at all, this relates to SDG10. Finally, I recruit key participatory theatre projects from Denmark, Canada, Chile and New Zealand to consider practical ways of understanding how participatory theatre may contribute to combating inequality through its attention to the lived experiences of inequality, the potential for making changes to individual lives, and its orientation to hope. In doing this, I hope to contribute new perspectives on drama and equity that

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<sup>1</sup> [kelly.freebody@sydney.edu.au](mailto:kelly.freebody@sydney.edu.au)

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present a nuanced and critical consideration the relationship between public discourses, policy and practice.

**Keywords:** participatory theatre, post-structural policy analysis, inequality, social justice

## Introduction

The idea that theatre, particularly participatory forms of theatre such as applied theatre and drama education, contribute to a social justice agenda is a potent one. It is evident in the way that the work is theorised, described and practiced globally. In this essay I explore the relationship between participatory theatre and equality beyond 'common-sense' connections often made in writings about drama as a force for 'good'. The purpose of this essay is to consider how, if at all, participatory theatre serves the Sustainable Development Goal number 10: Reducing Inequality (SDG10). While there is a significant amount of scholarship exploring the connection between theatre and social justice much of this either assumes a linear relationship between policy and practice (in that however a social idea is presented in policy is assumed to be how it is experienced in practice) or is silent on the discursive, subjective or lived effects of the representation of social justice the practice aims to serve. Rather than providing a clear pathway from problem to solution, this article aims to delve into the social and public idea of inequality, to consider how this impacts, and is impacted by participatory theatre scholarship and practice.

This paper is structured in three main parts. Firstly, I critically consider how 'inequity' as a solvable social and/or economic problem is represented by SDG10. I then place this in conversation with writing in the field of participatory theatre, critically considering how this work serves this, and other, representations of the problem. To do this, I draw on two previous research projects, one conducted by myself and colleagues (2018) and one conducted by Masso-Guijarro and colleagues (2021) that explicitly explore how scholarship in participatory theatre orient to social change agenda. Finally, I recruit key participatory theatre projects from Denmark, Canada, Chile and New Zealand to consider practical ways of understanding how participatory theatre may contribute to combating inequality. In doing this, I hope to contribute new perspectives on drama and equity that present a nuanced and critical consideration the relationship between public discourses, policy and practice.

Participatory theatre is often referred to as part of the 'umbrella' of applied theatre, encompassing theatre for development, theatre in education, drama education,

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prison theatre and community theatre (O'Connor & O'Connor, 2009). I use the term participatory theatre, rather than applied theatre, to highlight that I am referring to theatre programs that are designed to serve participants, rather than audiences. In this way I am aligning with an intention rather than practice – a theatre production of *Hamlet* performed in front of an audience after many weeks of rehearsal can be considered 'participatory theatre' in this chapter if the reason for the production is to serve the needs of the participants, such as many theatre programs funded to run in prisons and community centres. On the other end of a proverbial spectrum, drama activities done in a history classroom to teach children about the experiences of women in the Great Depression are also being categorised as participatory theatre.

Although not necessarily defined by a set of practices, some common elements of what I'm calling participatory theatre are a tendency to focus on a social or personal outcome as well as a performative one, and the deliberate use of bodies in space to improvise, act, perform, and imagine. Often such programs are oriented to achieving goals in community development, education, health, and personal development. In this way, participatory theatre can be understood as a 'tool' that is used by governments, NGOs, institutions and individuals to achieve something. In the case of this paper, I focus on participatory theatre that seeks to reduce inequality.

### **Theoretical and methodological influences**

This essay is influenced by the post-structuralist theories of power, policy and institutional knowledge and the methodological perspective of Carol Bacchi's *What's the Problem Represented to Be?* approach (WPR) (2009). Post-structural perspectives consider the 'problem' of inequality not as given but as *produced*. In this way it can only be understood through how it, and its solutions, are described by policies and social institutions. I am treating the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as 'policies' in this essay as they can be considered a "process through which political systems operate to solve problems at the institutional level" (Allan, Iverson, & Ropers-Huilman, 2010, p. 4). These processes are not value-free. Stephen Ball considers definitions of policy to be concerned with both text (i.e., the document themselves) and discourses which are "about what can be said, and thought, but also about who can speak, when, where and with what authority" (Ball, 2006, p. 48). In this way they "exercise power through a *production* of 'truth' and 'knowledge'" (*ibid.*). The SDGs, like most public documents that consider solutions to social, economic or political issues can be seen to position the problems they seek to address as a certain kind of understandable problems, which then allows them to have knowable

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solutions. In this way, SDG10 operates as a policy, or series of policy proposals about the problem of inequality.

The WPR approach seeks to analyse proposals made by policy by considering how the solutions to policy problems represent the problem in a particular way. The approach recognizes that social 'problems' do not exist outside of how we construct and represent them as solvable (or otherwise). By way of a brief example, if a government policy is aiming to combat the 'problem' of child obesity, understanding how the policy aims to solve this gives insight into what the problem is considered to be. If the policy mandates exercise in schools, the solvable problem relates to the children being inactive or lazy. If the policy provides parents with financial rebates for enrolling their children in sporting programs, then the problem can be considered one of access and incentive. If the policy bans advertisements for fast food in children's programming, then the problem can be considered an institutional, systemic issue. These three different approaches to the same 'problem' all impact the way that the participants (children at risk of obesity) are framed and effect not only public discourse about them, but the extent to which they (and others) view themselves as 'problematic'. In undertaking a WPR analysis, the research considers not only what the problem is represented to be, but also how such a representation has come to be; what seemingly commonsense ideas have built this representation as knowable and understandable. The analysis also considers what the discursive, subjective and lived effects of such a representation might be. In this form of analysis, the objective is not to try to identify the intentions behind a particular policy or program or to assess whether promised changes have or have not been achieved. Rather, we start from stated solutions to inquire into their implicit problematizations and the potential impact this has on what can and cannot be considered as relevant to the problem.

While not adhering strictly to the methodological steps, my use of WPR methodology, as discussed by Bacchi and Goodwin (2016, p. 48), considers how policy 'problems' are constructed to explore how inequality is constituted as a particularly kind of problem, and the presentation of drama/theatre as a solution. I aim to engage in a critical exploration of way drama for equality is written about, and how we might understand the contribution of such work to a global equality agenda.

### **What is inequality?**

I sought to begin this paper with a working definition of inequality. However, many of the documents I draw on in this essay have different, sometimes contested,

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approaches to understanding inequality. Therefore, rather than a clear definition of the concept, I begin by making the general, almost banal, observation that *everyone* seems to care about inequality. I have claimed previously, the term social justice “has been taken up by institutions and organizations of all kinds – governments, non-government organizations, large corporations, small businesses, charities, elite schools, disadvantaged schools, universities, churches, as well as by political parties across the political spectrum.” (Removed for review p. 65). Likewise, there is a huge amount of public writing, concern, scholarship and research on inequality. Mike Savage opens his book *The Return of Inequality*, with the statement that it “has become commonplace – even trite – to claim that inequality is the defining challenge of our time” (Savage, 2021, p. vii). In the 2022 *Global Risks Report*, the World Economic Forum considered growing inequality as one of the most notable areas of socio-economic concern, specifically due to its “interaction with ideological polarization” (2022, p. 22). From churches to activists, from schools to nation states, inequality appears to be something that people think should be given attention.

Two things worth noting about this seemingly universal ‘care’ about inequality. Firstly, while the care about inequality is shared and appears to be relatively common-sense, the conceptualisation of the ‘problem’ of inequality, and the solutions needed, are not. Secondly, although there is significant scholarship and research concerning itself with inequality, much of which has ‘world’ or ‘global’ in its title or concern, attention to the ‘problem of inequality’ is not evenly or commonly understood. It is a “geopolitical issue that plays out differently across the globe” (Savage, 2021, p. 21) It is, according to Savage, “a highly Western-centred discourse” (*Ibid.*).

### **Inequality in SDG10: What is the problem represented to be?**

We cannot understand the relationship between theatre and SDG10 without first considering how the SDGs understand the ‘problem’ of inequality, how theatre understands the problem of inequality, and the intersection (if any) between these two things. In this section, I attempt to unpack how the documents that outline and explain SDG10 describe and position ‘inequality’ as a knowable and changeable concept or experience.

The first point I’d like to make about SDG10 is that the focus is on inequality, *not* equality. This is significant because, as I said earlier, how a policy explains its territory shapes what discussions can be had, what solutions make sense, what (and whose) ideas are highlighted, and what/who is silenced. By positioning the solutions

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around limiting the damage of inequality, it “abandons the prospect of equality” (Savage, 2021, p. 16). This changes what be considered in the goal, the focus of discussions and whose experiences are the focus.

There are several documents related to the Goals that produce inequality as a problem able to be reduced. The UN website documents an overview of each goal<sup>2</sup>, the specific targets and indicators, and yearly progress reports<sup>3</sup>. It is predominantly this information that I use to inform this section of the essay, particularly the targets and indicators. It is through these ‘solutions’ presented on the website that we can grasp the best understanding of what the problem of inequality *is* according to the SDGs. However, there are also several accompanying documents published for interested publics that explain the goal, and orient to the problem of inequality in different ways. I also draw on the UN publication “Reduced inequality: Why it matters<sup>4</sup>” to understand how the goal is communicated to individuals.

From reading the overview of SDG10, one could be forgiven for thinking that reducing inequalities covers all aspects of economic, social and political life. The overview of the goal begins with a discussion of economic factors: income, trade, and employment in the first three paragraphs, but then orients to issues related to gender, health services, refugees, migrants, indigenous peoples, people with a disability, older persons, children and the rise of hate speech in the two paragraphs that follow. From this, any population considered ‘vulnerable’ or any form of social, political or economic exclusion can be seen as in the purview of SDG10. That said, many of the associated documents draw heavily on the Gini Co-Efficient to make the claim that inequality was reducing but is getting worse again post COVID-19 pandemic. The Gini only measures income which indicates one of two things: there is an assumed relationship between the extent to which income distribution between nations are equal other aspects of socio-political life so strong that measurement in one can make claims about the other. Or UN judgement of (and therefore understanding of) inequality is, in fact, based on income distribution.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/inequality/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal10>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/10\\_Why-It-Matters-2020.pdf](https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/10_Why-It-Matters-2020.pdf)

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The targets themselves, however, are more specific and predominately orient to reducing economic inequality. There are several specific targets and indicators for SDG10, some of which include<sup>5</sup>:

- Income growth for bottom 40% at a rate higher than the rest of nation
- Ensure equal opportunity and reduce inequalities of outcome, including by eliminating discriminatory laws, policies and practices and promoting appropriate legislation, policies and action in this regard. This target, unlike most others is one of the only ones with an indicator that considers peoples experiences rather than their socio-economic situation. This target is indicated by fewer people *feeling* personally discriminated against (italics added).
- Adopt policies that achieve greater equity, especially fiscal policies and indicated by the redistributive impact of policies.
- Improve the regulation and monitoring of global financial markets
- Facilitate safe and orderly migration including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies
- Encourage development assistance and financial flows to countries that need it

From these targets, we can deduce that Reducing Inequality as a global action, is related to successful implementation/use of international legislation, financial institutions and fiscal policies. There is a focus on vulnerable peoples (such as migrants) but the act of helping these peoples is through legislation and policymaking (e.g., migration policies) with a strong orientation to financial indicators (e.g., remittance costs). These solutions, for the most part, present inequality as a problem of government, drawing on the need for better tariff and trade agreements across nations and better managed policies within nations.

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<sup>5</sup> For a complete list of targets and indicators see:  
<https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/metadata/?Text=&Goal=10>

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Unlike these targets and indicators of SDG10, the presentation of inequality in the 'why it matters' document calls on the identities implicit in socio-political dialogues about equality: income sex, age, disability, sexual orientation, race, class, ethnicity, religion and opportunity. This document tends to focus more on a category-bound conceptualisation of inequality that is established in the overview. Here the solution is presented as a reduction in discrimination and exclusion experienced by particularly social categories, which in turn conceives the problem as related to the social category itself as opposed to the focus on problematic fiscal and migration policies and discriminatory laws. This is a different problematisation of inequality, and one in which individuals and societies more generally are core to the problem.

Reading the *why it matters* document alongside the targets and indicators then raises questions about how the goal is created for the public imagination as something worth caring about, compared to the potentially 'dry' economic and legislative goal that is detailed in the targets. For example, despite neither the categories women and children or the institutional issue of healthcare being explicit foci in the targets or indicators, 'women and children with lack of access to healthcare' is the first example given of inequality in the 'why it matters' document. Women and children are social categories that have historically been established in public discourse as vulnerable and virtuous, therefore not only in need of, but also deserving, care (Arora-Jonsson, 2011; Meyer, 2007). Additional examples of inequality in this document consider how social categories experience discrimination. Discrimination seems to be an important way that inequality is understood and enacted. One of the subheadings 'how can we tackle discrimination' makes a direct link between a reduction in personal discrimination (the solution) and reduced inequality, that is not made in the actual targets and indicators. While discriminatory *laws* are problematised in the targets, individuals' discriminatory *behaviour* is recruited in the 'why it matters' document. One argument would be that this shift in discourse is related to the audience of the two documents, and an assumption that individuals are more likely to care about things they can personally be involved in changing. Across the three documents, therefore, is a confusing conceptualisation of inequality that speaks to the idea that getting the public to believe inequality 'matters' requires a *different idea of what inequality is* that what is needed to understand how inequality, as a problem, might be reduced.

There are three different conceptualisations of the goal in the documents I have listed: the general overview that considers inequality as related to vulnerable groups;



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the actual targets of the goal, and indicators of success; and the call to action, *why it matters* document that seeks to make the goal important to individuals. Arguably, however, it is in the targets and indicators that the specifics of the 'solution' is presented, and therefore this could be understood as the governing problematisation. As I reflect on the specifics of this goal as a theatre-maker, I wonder about the role theatre can play in meeting SDG10. Considering much participatory theatre takes place with people experiencing marginalisation and aims to recognise and represent those that are often 'silenced' or discriminated against in society, one can make a clearer link with ideas of why it matters rather than the specific targets of the goal. The following section explores how participatory theatre practice positions itself in relation to reducing inequality, and ways of considering inequality beyond, or in addition to, those presented by SDG10.

### **Inequality in participatory theatre: What's the problem represented to be?**

There is significant writing in the field of participatory theatre concerned with its relationship to inequality. Much of this writing advocates for the use of participatory theatre as a tool for combating inequality and celebrates theatre's capacity to improve the lives of its participants. In this essay I draw on results from two research studies focused on coding or synthesising scholarly texts in the fields of drama and applied theatre: Previous research undertaken by myself and colleagues that engaged in thematic coding of 139 documents related to applied theatre (removed for review, 2018) and more a recent qualitative synthesis of 21 research articles in participatory theatre (Massó-Guijarro et al., 2021). I use this research to consider repeated themes that orient to how participatory theatre leads to outcomes that could be broadly considered as reducing inequality, and from these themes, make analytical proposals regarding how scholars in the field of participatory theatre represent 'inequality' as policy or socio-political 'problem' that can be addressed through their work.

Like many in the social sciences, participatory theatre scholars often orient to exclusion a key factor in understanding inequality. Masso-Guijarro and colleagues (2021) draw on Castel (1995) to explore inequality through markers of social exclusion and vulnerability:

*.../ 'not only a lack of income and withdrawal from the labour market, but also a weakening of social ties, a decline in social participation and,*

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therefore, a loss of social and cultural rights' (Masso-Guijarro, 2021 p.340).

In many ways this is a similar production of inequality as the overview document of SDG10 (being excluded from a 'better life') explored above. However, there is a significant difference in how participatory theatre positions this 'problem' through the tools used to understand its 'solutions'.

Unlike the targets and indicators developed in SDG10, participatory theatre programs tend to focus how they can change the participants involved. Below I've highlighted five themes that are synthesised from the two research projects. These themes demonstrate how many scholars and practitioners in the field of participatory theatre construct or produce 'inequality' as policy or socio-political 'problem' that can be addressed through their work:

*Social Justice and Social Change:* These are terms that are no stranger to the participatory theatre field. Rather than tangible and specific, the inter-related concepts of social justice and social change are often considered the role theatre plays as an enabler, in enabling participants to do something that makes their lives better, or through advocacy, theatre that gives participants opportunities to advocate for their needs or each other. These ideas, I have previously argued, rely on "the central premise of active, civic, engagement; the idea that participating in an event that is political (in this case an applied theatre program) changes someone." (Removed for review, 2018, p.51).

*Empowerment and voice:* Scholars have considered the role of participatory theatre in serving the needs of traditionally 'silenced' collectives, as a tool for "repressed voices to become heard" (Massó-Guijarro et al., 2021, p. 345). The idea that 'giving voice' to participants 'does good' is evident in many documents in the field and connects with core ideas of recognition and representation as core tenets of justice. There are, however, several critical perspectives on this idea. Kamler reminds us that *voice* "is situated – not singular but multiple... to argue for a voice that is always located... and to reject a universal call for the voice that will simply empower" (2001, p. 36).

*Education:* A large amount of participatory theatre is funded or organised to teach participants about something (increased knowledge) or to do something (increased skill). From drama workshops to teach language to newly arrived refugees, to drama

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education, to programs to teach young people about safe partying practices, education in a central way writing about participatory theatre presents itself as a solution to a myriad of social problems, including inequality (Removed for review, 2018).

*Personal or community development:* This repetitive theme is concerned with the use of participatory arts to improve the lives of people or communities. The fictional world of theatre is seen as a rehearsal for learning, risking, and trialling new things. This rhetoric is prevalent in drama in education literature and in institutions such as prisons whereby theatre is often used as part of programming to reduce instances of re-offence. The participants can learn to 'thrive' through practice in the fictional world of drama (Harkins, Haskayne, Watson, Beech, & Sweeney, 2009). There is also a discussion in the participatory theatre field about how creating distance through role (playing a character rather than yourself) can provide the safety that some participants need to explore traumatic events (Baim, 2017).

*Recognition:* As I discuss below, recognition is a central aspect of Nancy Fraser's understanding of justice, and one of the ways that the participatory theatre field understands the solution (and therefore the problem) of its work with participants experiencing marginalisation. Providing spaces that tell the stories of inequality provides those that do not experience it a perspective in which to understand the 'stuff' of inequality, rather than just the numbers. In their synthesis of documents, Masso-Guijarro and colleagues oriented to the telling of counter-hegemonic stories that make "the invisible visible" (2021, p. 346).

I make no judgements here about what (if any) productions of inequality are correct or useful. It does appear, however, that the way the participatory theatre field understands inequality as a problem is different to how the SDGs have positioned the problem of inequality. It is therefore, in my opinion, not really possible to consider how theatre works in service of these goals. No doubt a vast search of evaluation reports would find some theatre programs that make attempts to create system-wide change in economic structures, perhaps through theatre programs with world leaders or policymakers, but these would be in the minority. Most of the work in this area is focused on empowering or teaching those that are experiencing inequality, rather than those that are in privileged positions of power. The question of whether participatory theatre contributes to a more equal society is different to the (much more specific) question of whether participatory theatre contributes to meeting the

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targets and indicators of SDG10. Although a provocative statement, it would seem on the face of it, participatory theatre has very little to do with SDG10.

Having got that problem out of the way, I now wish to take a different approach to thinking about meeting the goal of 'Reducing inequality' and explore three contributions participatory theatre (as well as other forms of participatory art), make to this approach. All three of these contributions are intersecting and it is arbitrary that I have split them up for discussion. However, I've done so as it allows a more nuanced exploration into how we can understand relationship between participatory theatre, the participants themselves, and the context of structural inequality.

### **Other ways of representing inequality**

Some social scientists and economists have problematised the SDGs and their predecessor, the Millennium goals as a catalyst for an increasingly distanced, 'league table driven' view of inequality (Alvaredo & Gasparini, 2015; Savage, 2021). In this brief section, therefore, I outline other potential ways of understanding the 'problem' of inequality to explore how participatory theatre might interact with or address it. There is more to inequality than the outcome of inequality itself. Savage argues that empirical understandings of inequality aren't enough but that we also need to understand the 'wider theoretical and political problems that inequality poses' (2021, p. vii) including intersecting axes of inequality, class, race, gender, ethnicity and so on. Here he argues us to move past a focus on the 'stuff' of inequality, to consider the way this 'stuff' intersects with history and society to 'synthesize and understand social change as a whole" (p. x). This speaks to the interrelatedness of economic circumstances, political systems, and social lives.

The focus on income distribution in SDG10, through measurements such as the Gini Co-efficient provides only some information about inequality. What is missing from these measurements is empirical understanding of why it matters or experience it. It tells us little about the impact of inequality on individual circumstances and social relationships in context. Inequality may be a 'big idea', expressed and understood as complex, intersectional and global, but it is not experienced by individuals as 'big idea'. It is experienced in people's everyday interactions with institutions, systems, and people. Therefore, many that work in places or with people that are marginalised by issues related to inequality, argue for a much more nuanced and context-driven understanding inequality and its impact. The argument here is that to understand inequality, we need to consider not just that it exists (and to what extent) but also how

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it's experienced. This speaks not only to practicalities like bank balances, access to housing, university graduations, but also to notions of stigma, disrespect, shame (Atkinson, 2010).

Although coming from a different scholarly tradition to those making the claims above, Nancy Fraser's (2007) model for understanding justice in a globalised world is attuned to these ideas. It is also a theory of justice that informs recent scholarship in participatory theatre (Barolsky, 2021; Removed for review 1; Neelands, 2007). Like SDG10 and the papers in applied theatre reviewed above, Fraser considers exclusion to be key to the identification and explanation of injustice. The principle of 'parity of participation' (Fraser, 2000) works on the premise that for a society to be considered just, all members of society should be able to participate in it. Unpacking that further, Fraser explore the ways that people participate and potential barriers to participation. She considers equity through the complex and interrelated notions of economic distribution, socio-cultural recognition and respect, and political representation (often considered the 3Rs – redistribution, recognition and representation) (Fraser, 2007).

The approach to understanding inequality presented here does not ignore finances or fiscal policy, but it provides different pathways through which to explore the practice and scholarship of drama for equality, seeking to understand the governing discourses of this work, consider what it seeks to achieve, and how it conceptualises social change. As one applied theatre scholar reflects, issues about poverty and economic inequality are rarely addressed in participatory theatre programs, issues *arising* from poverty however, are central "because of the way poverty marks out their identity"(Ahmed & Hughes, 2015, p. 395). The key themes that the field of participatory theatre organises itself around listed above (social justice, voice, education and so on), can be seen to be serving the goal of reducing inequality through its attention beyond the 'stuff' of inequality. Below I outline three ways participatory theatre can do this: through its attention to context and lived experience; through its ability to make change in the here-and-now that directly impacts participants; and for its hopefulness. There are hundreds of participatory theatre programs happening across the world right now. In the section below I draw on a few key examples, not intended to be exhaustive or representative, but chosen for their breadth of practice and geographic distance from each other, to illustrate how these ideas become evident through the work of participatory theatre.

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***Attention to real contexts and lived experiences of inequality***

Many would claim that participatory theatre can contribute to reducing inequality due to its ability to provide context and deeper understanding *about* inequality. This speaks to some of the criticisms laid at the feet of solely economic understandings of inequality and why it matters. Beyond an what might be considered an idealistic rhetoric about the 'gifting of voice' to those with lived experiences of inequality, participatory theatre work with those living in or with inequality can 'strengthen knowledge creation from *within* the field of marginalisation' (Tofteng & Husten, 2011, p.29, italics added). This shift in focus, from 'giving voice' to creating knowledge from within the experiences of inequality sees a different rhetoric emerge regarding the power structures of the activity. Are those living in marginalised circumstances creating knowledge to share, or are those more powerful giving them the gift of 'voice'. There is evidence of both discourses in the field of participatory theatre, but the importance of knowledge creation from within is, I would argue, one way that the important 'stuff' of inequality can become knowable.

Tofteng & Husten's (2011) research based in Denmark found that theatre and drama activities built into an action research project based working with people experiencing long term unemployment allowed new ways to communicate ideas (that were embodied and context driven). This made visible knowledge and experiences of those that usually do not reach those with influence over the structures of power and are seldom considered or heard in the public agenda. Similarly, Scholars reporting on a project addressing inequality in Canada that saw a collaboration between a youth shelter and theatre company, make problematic the silence of the shelter-dwelling youth in contributing to hegemonic and normative public notions of their lives and experiences (Gallagher, Starkman, & Rhoades, 2017). The drama methodology, according to these researchers, activated a youth critique of structural inequalities and made public space for the these participants to position themselves as agents of resistance within an increasingly unequal system.

A research project exploring theatre workshops in two sites in Chile – an adolescent reparation centre and an adult prison – found that participants experienced the actual and fictional spaces of the drama activities and rehearsals as places of discovery, validation and relocation (Retuerto et al., 2020). Theatre as a place of discovery oriented in part to notions of learning (new ideas, new words, new perspectives) but also to discover an ability to criticise the system, opening possibilities for them to contribute to political debate. Theatre as a place for validation connects strongly with

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ideas already discussed – those of recognition and voice – although the authors suggest it is not produced ‘by the ability to express yourself onstage, but rather for what you are expressing’ (Retuerto et al., 2020, p. 205). The notion of theatre as a place of relocation extends much of our discussion about theatre as a space for active resistance to remind us that, for many living in precarious circumstances, theatre can be a place of enjoyment, of feeling ‘normal’, of letting off steam, and of feeling hopeful. It is, therefore, a symbiotic relationship, not just what we can learn *from* the context of our participants, but the particular embodied, emotional and expressive engagement that participatory theatre offers to the context.

### ***Theatre can make change that impacts the here-and-now***

In their discussion of participatory theatre and knowledge production, Tofteng and Husted (2011) suggest that participatory theatre as a social action takes place ‘between criticism and social change’. This speaks to a theme of much concern in participatory theatre praxis; what is the relationship to change and how do we understand it. In the Canadian study above, the researchers claim that far from being a purely symbolic and one-off act of what Fraser might consider recognition-work, the theatre work in the youth shelters had a series of practical outcomes that had an impact on the everyday lives of the young participants (Gallagher et al., 2017). Through the drama work, the young people shared resources, considered how they could respond to continually oppressive situations, and share information about issues such as civilian rights. The researchers note that an “individual’s story is always embedded in larger social and political structures and contexts” (Gallagher et al., 2017, p. 226) and that working in an ensemble, doing drama, the experience of one person can inform and influence the group. This allowed the group to share and imagine new ideas and “new forms of resistance” (*Ibid.*).

There was a similar orientation to the potential for actual change in Tofteng and Husted’s theatre work with people experiencing unemployment. The group working together on developing ideas for the final performance suggested ideas for change that ranged from utopian (combating the representation of people experiencing marginalisation, equal rights, treating everyone as unique) through to targeted and practical (suggestions regarding resources, requests for a one contact system). The combination of local and general provide demonstrations of how the little changes in practice suggested by Michael Balfour (2009) can be magnified and, if sustained, can translate to larger changes that influence a group’s parity of participation: changes in redistribution, recognition and representation (Fraser, 2000).

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### **Hope**

In an Oxfam briefing paper, Deborah Hardoon claimed that inequality threatens to pull societies apart by leaving “more people living in fear and fewer in hope” (Hardoon, 2017, p. 2). My third claim in this essay is that participatory theatre can provide a space of hope, and that this (not so simple) act can combat inequality. This may seem like an overly idealistic proposition, and perhaps it is. I am certainly known to be an incurable idealist. That said, I hope to convince you in the coming paragraph that hope matters. That hope can have a tangible influence on the social and economic world, and that hope can be achieved through participatory theatre practice.

When I say hope, I am referring to a specific idea that beyond most common-sense uses of the word ‘hope’ – it is not optimism, faith, a general sense that all will be well, or a hope that the weather will be fine for our picnic tomorrow. I am referring to the idea of critical hope which emerged from scholars such as Freire and Giroux as a key idea underpinning the philosophy of Critical Pedagogy. Critical Pedagogy acknowledges that schools, and other socio-political institutions, are built on power structures that produce and maintain social, economic, educational and political inequality (Anyon, 2011). To have hope within these structures requires a belief in change. I argue that participatory theatre that works with those that are experiencing marginalisation does so underpinned by the belief that “social exclusion is dynamic and *reversible*” (Masso-Guijarro et al, 2021, p. 340, my italics). That things can change. For things to be considered changeable, they need to be understood as unfinished. Power structures cease to be static and instead society becomes “a challenge, rather than a hopeless limitation” (Freire, 1974, p. 11). Hope is something we do, rather than something we have. It is something we perform, at a time, in a place, with others, or on our own.

Hope is grounded in concrete performative practices, in struggles and interventions that espouse the sacred values of love, care, community, trust and well-being. Hope, as a form of pedagogy, confronts and interrogates cynicism, the belief that change is not possible or too costly (Denzin, 2003, p. 174)

Hope is not a recurring research theme in most of the social sciences. Like love, joy and beauty, it is seen as an ephemeral quality with little empirical substance or purpose. Research in drama education and applied theatre, however, has recently



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turned its focus on critical hope as a teachable, important, knowable concept that influences our understanding of what we do (Baxter, 2013; Gallagher & Rodricks, 2017). This concept, according to participatory drama scholars is not just personal, but political – a way of defeating the fatalism that pushes us to compromise rather than resist or transform (Freire, 2014). Gallagher & Rodricks conducted research exploring how creative and artistic engagement with hope and care could “provoke forms of engaged citizenship worth considering in times of increasing social, economic, and political instability” (2017, pp. 114-115) and concluded that, although not a panacea for structural inequalities, drama pedagogies could provide spaces where young people could talk back (even temporarily) to the oppressive structures of racism, competition and individualism.

In the chapter *Moments of Beauty and Resistance in Drama Education* Peter O’Connor, a New Zealand based applied theatre scholar and drama teacher reflects on his own childhood, and the lives of many children he has worked with who live in poverty. He concludes:

Moments of beauty are moments of great hope. As drama teachers we realize that our job is to create theatre that not merely describes the world, but points to ways in which it might be different. ... They are not just powerful instances of pedagogical intensity. They are also moments of political resistance and remind us that teaching is a political act, that teaching can still be a subversive process that promises the possibility of change (O’Connor, 2016, p. 140)

Hope, according to O’Connor, is ‘but a leap of the imagination’ (O’Connor & McTaggart, 2017). When people are given permission, opportunity, and strategy to imagine, they can ‘imagine an answer to dark times – they can find a way forward’ (O’Connor, 2021). Throughout his established career, O’Connor has focused on the importance of bringing joy and hope to ‘dark places’ (2015) and the potential of the arts, particularly drama, to do this. From teaching children to have empathy for terrorists (2013) to producing *Romeo and Juliet* with incarcerated youth (2015) to performing theatre in the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art with those experiencing homelessness on Skid Row (2019), O’Connor considers the humanising potential of the arts as resistance to institutions that systematically de-humanise their inhabitants. This idea brings the discussion about how theatre serves the equality agenda full circle. Bringing attention and care to the lived experiences of

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those who experience inequality, theatre not only makes changes in the here and now, but also helps imagine a way forward; hope as an act of resistance.

### Summing up

People are complex. Societies are complex. Notions of representation, social recognition, resilience and resistance are complex. This essay has not sought to find one truth about the relationship between inequality, the SDGs and participatory theatre. Above I have indicated three ways that participatory theatre provides a space for participants to be active within an explicit or implicit goal to 'reduce inequality' through its attention to lived experience, little changes made in the here-and-now, and its orientation to hope. That is not to say there are not critical views on the relationship participatory theatre has with its participants. As I alluded to before, scholars in the field are troubled by the potential for vulnerable groups to become 'parasitised by professional theatre companies for their own commercial gain' (Massó-Guijarro et al., 2021, p. 348). This concern is not siloed to the arts field, social scientists from different backgrounds have discussed the 'poverty industry' (Hatcher, 2016) and wondered whether inequality has "become the latest banner around which experts can mobilize new kinds of professional skills?" (Savage, 2021, p. 2). Further, there is a shift in much public discussion towards the wealthy and privileged as the 'problem', evident in public movements such as *occupy Wall Street*. While this shift is evident in some of the critical writing in the field, it appears to have had little impact on participatory theatre practices. There are critical conversations that need to be had regarding the extent to which we focus on individuals, particularly those experiencing marginalisation, as opposed to the structures which caused the marginalised in the first place.

As someone who works in the fields of applied theatre and drama education, who is also concerned about power, privilege and inequality (although coming at this from a very privileged and powerful position myself), I know from my own experience the desire to help, to make change, and try and be part of some kind of imagined global 'solution'. As Jamil Ahmed states in his dialogue with Jenny Hughes:

What does a theatre practitioner do when s/he is faced with abject poverty, discrimination and exploitation all around him/her? Does s/h pretend everything is fine, or does s/he roll up the sleeve and engage with the situation by means of the only 'tool' (i.e., performance making) that

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s/he can, to examine the situation and try change it? (Ahmed & Hughes, 2015, p. 396).

I have sympathy (and gratitude), therefore, for those in the field that are working with the tools they have to try and make change. This does not mean that the critiques do not matter, in fact, I argue that they matter even more. It is central to our work that we are critical of what we do, that check ourselves (and each other), and that we are aware that by aiming to address a social 'problem' we are participating in the public construction of that 'problem' and through this, risking reproducing the inequalities we seek to counter (Ahmed & Hughes, 2015, p. 399).

In this essay I have tied myself in knots. I have twisted the discussion within and through the narratives, contradictions, possibilities and constraints of economic and sociological constructions of inequality, the SDGs, and participatory arts practices. In writing this essay, I have had moments of confusion, repetition, clarity, and whimsy as I have traversed this intellectual terrain.

Participatory theatre provides an opportunity to produce local knowledge from within the experience of inequality. More than this, it can make this local knowledge public knowledge which allows it to be debated, researched and considered, potentially adding new knowledge to more universal understandings of the issue in question.

Participatory theatre can make changes to individual lives in the here-and-now. This includes learning new skills, gaining social support, imagining and practicing alternative ways to interact, teaching others, and so much more.

Finally, participatory theatre, by its very nature, orients to the idea that the world can change. This hopeful perspective allows us to consider how we can act in ways that do good.

### **About the author**

Kelly Freebody is associate professor at The Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, The University of Sydney. Her research focuses on drama, young people, education, and social justice. Her work considers the history of ideas in the fields of drama education and theatre. Kelly was Co-Editor of the recent Routledge Companion to Theatre and Young People (2022) and is Co-Editor of the Applied Theatre Research journal. Her program of research seeks to develop theoretical and practical

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understandings of the ways in which drama of/for/about social justice operates in a variety of institutional and educational settings.

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