



CHARTERING THE UNCHARTED WITH THE EXPRESSIVE ARTS THERAPIES IN GHANA

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Abstract:

This research explored Expressive Arts Therapies with the children with special needs at the Echoing village in Madina, Accra, Ghana. The special needs children in this study are being cared for in a private special institution/ home. In this study, various components of the expressive arts have been used to heal and invigorate the children with special needs and to help change people's negative perceptions about their capabilities in Ghana in general. These negative, social and cultural perceptions have compounded the problem of convincing society about what the special needs are capable of achieving when creative interventions are applied. The children at the Echoing village were offered the opportunity to explore and practice meaningful actions methods to enhance their intellectual, social and emotional development. Their intellectual inadequacies nevertheless did not hinder them from exploring their artistic capabilities to achieve this aim.

Keywords: expressive arts therapies, intellectual disabilities, children with special needs, Ghana

1. Introduction

A closer look at the components of the Expressive Arts; dance, drama, music, poetry, visual art etc., disclose an enormous potential in effecting positive attitudinal and behavioral change in its users. Expressive Arts is explored in this context as a potential teaching tool for intervention to achieve change and transformation in these special needs children. In these creative processes, the children are encouraged to develop their artistic potentials regardless of their intellectual shortfalls so that their handicaps become tolerable to allow development to proceed. In so doing, their inherent latent capacities which are housed in the right hemisphere of the brain are unearthed and developed raptly to achieve these developmental needs. These art forms in this context

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therefore become viable tools for instruction, empowerment and healing. Employing the other creative arts as teaching tools to extract their concealed abilities therefore, can challenge their status, and propel them to use these creative interventions to benefit them and society at large.

2. The Creative Expressions

It is universally acknowledged that, Africans and many other indigenous cultures have relied on the arts for healing. As Rogers (1993) affirms, *“Ancient cultures did not separate their arts from healing. It was all one and the same. Dance, song, and visual art were part of everyday life, and it was understood that all aspects of the self must participate in life to be whole”* (p. 96). For this reason, the present day cultures are making enormous efforts to do same in order to benefit humanity and foster development.

These unique creative approaches to education are in sync with the ultimate purpose of drama in education as stated by Siks (1977); thus *“to open children’s minds, stimulate their imaginations and language abilities and to spark their enthusiasm for continued personal development and discovery”*. (p. 6). Children form amazing and exceptional images and ideas during playful moments. These ideas therefore become handy and helpful in real life situations; during different stages of their development. Children who get involved in these activities whether ‘regular’ or in the category of the special needs therefore are able to overcome challenging experiences they encounter in and outside the classroom to improve them.

Rogers (1993) emphasizes that, *“the creative process as experienced through the expressive arts is one path to self-discovery, self-esteem and self-empowerment”* (p. 22). In this case, the arts are used as tools for training these special needs children to achieve social change, personal transformation and growth. The creative capabilities in these special needs children are transformed into honest creative expressions that can offer them strength and self-worth.

According to Rubin (1987);

“There is only a thin line between active imagination and art...there is magic in both healing and creating...While we are involved in this process of active imagination through any of the arts, we not only place emphasis on the aesthetic aspect of our work but also on the healing.”

(p.119)

Art and healing are closely related, but one must see beyond the ordinary in a relentless effort; to see deeper and in a more profound way than the art work appears. That is the only way our interpretation of the art work would give meaning and a new dimension of breakthrough to users. The attainment of authenticity, autonomy and self-actualization through creative expressions is to help individuals as well as groups to be able to take charge of their lives.

3. Research Objective

To explore creative ways of helping children with special needs, unearth their latent creative abilities to enhance their social, emotional and intellectual development.

3.1 Research Question

To what extent has the application of the Expressive arts; help to unearth the latent and talent abilities in children with special needs achieve their healing and development?

4. Research Methodology

This study relied essentially on qualitative methodology with phenomenological inclination. Essentially, the approach incorporates an element of practice into the methodology. This method is also called Practice as Research (PaR) or Action Research in some jurisdictions. The success derived in my treatment of the methodology therefore is obtained in the creative activities and improvisations which were developed for the children to partake in. The investigations focused on the children with special needs at the Echoing Hills Village. The expressive art processes explored included drama, dance, poetry, drawing and collage.

4.1 Expressive Arts as tools for development at the Echoing Hills Village, Madina, Accra

The Echoing Hills Village is situated in Madina, in the Abokobi District of the Greater Accra region of Ghana. Echoing Hills is one of the Private Special Institutions/home in the Greater Accra Region that handles diverse Special Needs within the same institution. Other private special facilities such as the New Horizon in Cantonments, the Autism Center in Kokomlemle and many others, handle specific special needs cases.

The use of the expressive arts for problem solving has progressively helped children with special needs in two other public special schools I worked with. At the Echoing Hills Village, the special needs children included the physically disabled, the deaf and dumb as well as the cognitive impaired. These children were encouraged to express themselves freely and fully in any of these expressive arts to bring forth their innate and intuitive abilities that can help them achieve healing, independence and growth.

4.2 Drama

Exploring drama as therapy for cognitive impaired children is to offer them the opportunity to create and practice meaningful actions that have the capacity to enhance their intellectual, psychological, social and physical development. The choices of the processes were mainly concerned with the strengths, weaknesses and interests of the distinct groups. I again agree with Rogers (1993) on the premise that, *'art forms must not be made to remain as separate entities only to be admired'* (p.1). The arts must be used as collaborative tools in unearthing of potentials in users; which will in turn connect to

their inner core and reach out to the world at large. The involvement of the children with Special needs in these creative processes has helped to achieve healing through the spontaneous and deliberate use of these creative interventions. The gradual development of playful but educative activities in these improvisations also uncovered the children's creative capabilities and innovations. Although, the children worked in groups, the individual's input also contributed to the overall group work.

The activities within the scenario of the play worked basically around three concepts: Moreno's (1947) concept of *identity, mirroring and role-reversal*; Blatner's (1988) *playful, useful and cooperative*; and Jennings' (1987) *embodiment, projection and role*.

Role reversal for instance, is done not only to reconcile children with special needs with society, but also to educate society about certain undesirable behaviors and attitudes as well as other societal misconceptions about them. In so doing, society can also acknowledge their abilities within their disabilities. All these concepts which function around parallel philosophies, stress on exploring the immediate and external environments of users by enacting the situations to suit what pertains in their 'world' and to help surmount these problems. The idea behind this is for all within the society to familiarize themselves with these circumstances and amend their ways.

The Importance of Hand washing is the title of the play. The photo below shows certain occurrences in society which were mirrored during the performances. This photo by *Echoing Hills* portrays a doctor attending to a pupil who was rushed to the hospital as a result of diarrhea. The depiction of this critical concern initiated allows these children to be conscious of certain societal practices, and to help improve upon the best practices. Theatre indeed has the capacity to transform and liberate users.



Figure 1: The doctor is attending to the sick girl

4.3 Poetry Recitals at Echoing Hills

Speech is a major problem for most intellectually impaired children, and since some of the special needs children in Echoing Hills Village, exhibited profound abilities in clear speech, they were rehearsed for poetry recital to enhance their fluency. Depending on their individual abilities, interest and clarity in speech, they were given either short or lengthy poems. These poems aided them to overcome their timidity and to build their confidence.

Poetry is another expressive arts process that exposes users to insightful ways of revealing important truths about life. These poems give meaning to life by articulating very important values of life that offer healing. The special needs children in Echoing Hills were admirable as they recited their poems on the day of performance.

4.4 Drawing at Echoing Hills

When visual art is offered as therapy, teaching and development; imagery, color, self-expression and self-exploration are recycled to describe the inner self of the user. Studies have shown that visuals play very vital role in children's development, and help to create lasting impressions on their minds. The most important communications of these special needs children are based on descriptions of images. The children's ability to create spontaneously affords them the opportunity to imagine and use of all their senses freely.

The drawing part uncovered very interesting imagery about these children. I however did not look at how beautiful a drawing may be, but the interpretation of that art piece. These interpretations hinge on what the patient is trying to communicate to the outside world. Although the interpretation(s) may be subjective, the ability to make sense of these drawings is crucial to this project. Asking questions for clarification was the most difficult moment for me because, some of these children have speech impairment, and verbal communication was impossible. In analyzing these art works, my interpretations go beyond the visible work, to be able to perceive what the child is actually communicating. My inferences may be accurate or flawed, but the most significant thing is the appreciation of these drawings (*Two of these drawings are analyzed below*).

The two drawings that I examined belong to Dela and Juanita. Dela is an autistic boy who smiled for the very first time in three weeks, because he was asked to draw a football. It was a moment of discovery, to see Dela smiling so broadly. I was later made aware of Dela's hobby as watching of football. This without doubt is an indication that, when we discover the appropriate approach that accommodates every individual's special need, we can achieve great successes. To be able to identify a specific thing that makes an autistic boy communicate his emotions through smile or laughter is no mean achievement. This for me is emotional healing. Dela's reward as form of reinforcement subsequently, was a football and a jersey, and this thrilled him more (*Photo of Dela in the process of drawing is vividly captured below*).

In another example, Juanita, a severe cerebral palsy girl portrays a colorful image in her drawing. Her choice of colors; bright red and green depicts her confidence.

Though the interpretation of this picture is shrouded in mystery, I could only assume her optimism about life in her choice of colors. Juanita, whose limbs are not strong enough to hold anything, draws with the mouth. For her reinforcement, she was provided with pencils and other art kits to encourage her to do more.



Figure 2: Dela an autistic boy smiling for the very first time because he is drawing a football



Plate 1: Dela's finished work of a football



Figure 4: Juanita drawing with her mouth



Plate 2: Juanita's finished work

4.5 Collage Making at Echoing Hills

The collage segment was equally stimulating. In this session, the children were asked to differentiate between the regions in Ghana using various items such as sand, stones, gravel, leaves, etc. The enthusiasm with which they worked and their extreme interest in these arts was simply overwhelming.

In order to empower and provide the children with cognitive impairment with new answers and new alternatives to their problems, they must genuinely get involved in these creative processes with a purposeful interaction and a meaningful participation.

When a particular child is not able to directly use a specific medium, an alternative medium is offered to help him/her to access a different form. This strategy allows each person to learn in a unique way, and to connect with the problem indirectly through these functional processes in order to achieve healing

I agree with Rubin (1987) when she notes that, “*there are many paradigms and more than one lens through which to view our complex world*”. (p. 317). There is therefore the need for both feeling and thought to be integrated in the therapeutic processes. The arts have great potentials to achieve progress for the children with special needs and this has been exhibited in the collage making session where the children used different items to create the Ghana map. The pictures below show the children distinguishing the Regions on the map of Ghana using various items.



Plate 1: Collage making session (A)



Plate 3: Collage making session (C)

4.6 Dance at Echoing Hills

Dance or movement awakens our senses and allows the in-built aspects of the self to emerge. Dance enables users to integrate the inner self into the healing process in order to translate the inner beauty in to outer reality. The children of Echoing Hills Village explored Gotta and Gawu (both indigenous Ewe dances from the Volta Region of Ghana) to discover themselves. Several weeks of rehearsals resulted in the attainment of an impeccable performance. Ultimately, the process is as significant as the end product. The three photos below depict both rehearsal and performance respectively. On the day of performance, the children dressed in their beautiful costumes, danced with passion.



A display of Gotta dance by two children at a rehearsal at the Echoing Hills Village.



The children with special needs, volunteers and some audience members dancing.



5. Findings

Exploring the expressive arts in this research place a lot more emphasis on the process or how things are done, than the product or what is derived at the end. In other words, this kind of unearthing of creative talents does not look at the excellent style in the final delivery or performance nor the best written poem, the most enjoyable song, the finest visuals of the art, or the most beautiful drama, or dance performance. The moment of discovery in creativity in this sense looks for the expressing of the self in it's fullness during the processes.

The intellectual shortfalls of these special needs children nevertheless did not hinder them from exploring their artistic capabilities to achieve this purpose. They have indeed proved that when given the chance, they are capable of pulling surprises. Indeed, Ghanaians as a people must make intentional efforts to embrace these artistic interventions.

The key question posed by the research is to find out if the expressive arts processes/practices are able to help children with special needs unearth their hidden abilities and talents to enhance their development. The work done in the Echoing Hills village with the special needs demonstrates that, this outcome is achievable. It was evident that the children who took part in the projects willingly participated in these activities with enthusiasm and demonstrating their talents to the admiration of many.

This project has opened up diverse therapeutic uses of the creative arts to achieve healing in these children. The critical drive of this research is to see the cognitive impaired discover themselves through the creative interventions offered them. In these creative options, the children undertook varied improvisations which helped them to take very simple initiatives, and do modest things to help themselves.

5.1 Recommendations

There is the need therefore to augment research and education in the expressive arts for the special needs in Ghana. This should not only be replicated in the segregated schools but also in the inclusive educational settings. The creative arts must be integrated into our educational systems and must not be seen only as entertainment or recreation but as tools for education and development.

The creative approaches to teaching and developing children with cognitive impairment should be highly encouraged and given immense support. Children whether in or out of the classroom, whether special or regular should be encouraged to offer ideas freely, do haphazard guesses, and predict outcomes but, they should be guided as much as possible.

Although most societies tend to value more highly the verbal, sequential and analytical skills of left hemisphere, the right hemisphere, where artistic, visual and simultaneous abilities are housed, is the best alternative for the cognitive impaired children.

6. Conclusions

The creative therapies have exposed us to the realization that some life's experiences and issues can conveniently be addressed through expressive and creative forms. The need therefore, to confront issues through these alternative forms have given relevance to the creative therapeutic options in this study. Creativity and therapy therefore, must not be seen as opposing each other, they must be collaborated into a unified whole so that creativity will no longer be static but will flow into different dynamic magnitudes of healing and development. This is because art and therapy are seen as manifesting two complementary positions, and when they merge with intent, they do not oppose one another; they collaborate 'to make art to heal and heal to make art'.

Although this research placed more emphasis on the process rather than the product, the end products in the forms of exhibitions and performances have also afforded many people; parents, teachers, lecturers and other audience members who witnessed them the chance to renew their minds about these children.

The special needs children were guided to participate in these creative activities both realistically and symbolically to arrive at solutions. These action methods offer them the opportunity to willingly work playfully by employing the creative arts processes to develop them socially, emotionally and intellectually. The moment of discovery in creativity in this sense, is the quest for articulating the self in fullness and trusting in how the creative work positively influences the user.

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