



EXHUMING THE LATENT ABILITIES IN THE COGNITIVE IMPAIRED IN GHANA USING PSYCHODRAMA OR DRAMA THERAPY

Tabitha Harriet Deh¹

Department of Theatre Arts,
University of Ghana,
Legon, Ghana

Abstract:

A closer look at the components of the Expressive Arts; dance, drama, music, visual art etc., discloses an enormous potential in effecting positive attitudinal and behavioral change in its users. Drama therapy and/or Psychodrama which encourages creativity and spontaneity, employs action methods in varied techniques to attain thriving therapeutic results. This concept is explored with the children of Dzorwulu Special School in Accra, Ghana. Healing in this context means to enliven the situations these children find themselves in, so that the creative activities they indulge in become a metaphor in this adjunct healing method. Drama therapy therefore is a potential teaching tool for intervention to achieve change and transformation in these special needs children. In these therapeutic processes, the children are encouraged to develop their artistic potentials regardless of their intellectual inadequacies so that their handicaps become tolerable to allow development to proceed. Creativity and therapy will then play complementary roles rather than opposing one another.

Keywords: latent abilities, cognitive impaired, psychodrama or drama therapy, Ghana

1. Introduction

It is universally acknowledged that, Africans and many other indigenous cultures have relied on the arts for healing; to relieve them from pain, oppression, suppression and depression. 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).

The above notion unreservedly points to the fact that, ancient cultures did not disconnect their arts from their healing processes. The understanding is that, all stages of human development have relied on the arts to make life worth living.

¹ Correspondence: email dehtabitha@yahoo.com

The use of the creative arts to articulate people's ideas, desires, and misgivings about definite or general, collective or individual concerns are indeed exceptional ways of achieving emotional healing. When pent-up anger and frustrations are eliminated, and tension released, depression and other psychosocial problems are solved, there is inevitable healthy living and progress in the society.

Studies have found out that, when the creative arts are effectively used in treating problems such as stress, obsessive and compulsive disorders, learning disabilities, and many other social and psychological problems, the results are remarkableⁱⁱ.

2. Psychodrama

The term Psychodrama is derived from two words, psyche meaning "mind or soul" and 'drama' meaning 'to do, to act or to struggle'. The fused term psychodrama refers to an individual's expression of his/her intellectual and emotional progressions not only through speech but also through action; movement and gestures. Psychodrama which literally means mind's action encourages actors to spontaneously act out scenes from their own lives' experiences in order to find solutions to them. The technique explores ways to express events, problems and needs through action methods for effective treatment of social anxiety, stress, obsessive and compulsive disorders and many other social, cultural, emotional and even medical problems.

Moreno (1947), the originator of psychodrama introduced three basic psychodramatic techniques which he linked with stages of child development. These include; "the idea of identity" or "doubling", "recognition of self" or "mirroring" and the "recognition of the other" or 'role reversal'. Moreno's techniques demonstrate interpersonal and intrapersonal conflicts implicitly and explicitly where the protagonist in the drama or improvisation is invited to move out of his own position, and role play another person's position.

Moreno's concepts of psychodrama are often conducted on stage with props and other theatrical elements. The clients, victims or characters are given the opportunity to evaluate their situations and reflect on how the past incident is played out in the present state. This makes it possible for the patient, victim, client or player gain a vivid understanding of the circumstances as they evolve into meaningful actions. Moreno

ⁱⁱ An Indian educational film entitled *Like Stars on Earth* shown on 2nd of May 2016 on Ghana television tells a story about a dyslexic boy in a mainstream school. He was given a special attention by his art teacher, who understood him because he was also a dyslexic at his young age. The art teacher in helping this boy told the class stories about dyslexics who became the world's most popular and famous geniuses of all time. They include; Albert Einstein; scientist and physicist, Leonardo Da Vinci; inventor and artist; Thomas Edison; inventor of electricity, Walt Disney; artist and Donna Tello; a famous painter. The film ends with the boy winning the school's most prestigious Award as the Best Artist. Policy makers in Ghana may have watched this film. This is because, on the 3rd of May 2016, a day after the film was streamed, the government of Ghana announced 100% enrolment of children with special needs into the long awaiting Inclusive Education Policy.

recognized that, an essential component of creativity is the phenomenon of spontaneity, which can promote the quality of life and foster personal, interpersonal and intrapersonal freedom and responsibility.

In this research, it was difficult for every child to improvise their situations with props as the theory proposed, so, these children played in groups, where the improvisations are similar to the situations in which they and other special needs children find themselves. By exploring some aspects of Moreno's theories in this project, these special needs children are able to identify with their uniqueness first and foremost before role playing other characters.

3. Drama Therapy

Drama therapy uses dramatic processes such as improvisation, mime, role-play, etc. for its therapeutic processes. Peter Slade is often accredited as the first to use drama as therapy, during his work in education in the United Kingdom, when he became aware of how children's play enhanced their lives to foster their development. Drama therapy was further developed by anthropologist Jennings, who seized the golden opportunity in the early sixties in Britain, when the application of drama within the educational framework began to direct itself towards work in clinical areas. It is held that while psychodrama was flourishing in the United States of America, drama therapy was also evolving in the United Kingdom. And whereas psychodrama worked with individuals mainly adults, drama therapy functioned with groups and focused predominantly on children.

Jennings (1995) also built her concept on Slade's and Moreno's ideas of drama therapy and psychodrama. She was particularly interested in how drama is used in therapy and renamed Moreno's theories as; "*Embodiment, Projection and Role*" (EPR). *Embodiment*; is used to explore the immediate external world by projecting feelings and intentions upon objects and people in their surroundings, *Projection*; brings about a sense of feeling of the self through their relationship with others and *Role*; a process in which children are ready to explore and play roles with others. The processes employed in drama therapy are often not rigid but allow a very flexible course of action which affects the user positively. In other words, the E stage deals with the child's early experiences. The P stage is the time for transition and the R stage begins when the child responds to the world beyond the body to facilitate problem solving and conflict resolution.

Jennings (1995) developed drama therapy and play therapy further and employed processes such as storytelling, games and puppetry, in her group work. Her concept of *Embodiment, Projection and Role*, as a developmental paradigm works progressively alongside other methods towards physical, cognitive, emotional and social development. The child therefore is able to enter the world of imagination and symbolism, and works towards growth, identity and independence.

The EPR concept of Jennings and Moreno's concept of Doubling, Mirroring and Role reversal were employed in my project to help the children with cognitive impairment to rediscover themselves, gain identity and uniqueness, and find ways to express their creativity to regain their self-worth. Moreno and Jennings use different wordings for their techniques but their theories practically describe the same things and their variations facilitate insight into these dramatic processes. These creative experiences helped these individual children gain an identity, extend the identity beyond the individual to the group and in a communal understanding, collaborated their efforts harmoniously. The theoretical frame-work in this study employs an eclectic approach and unifies them into a synergy. Although the use of concepts of both authorities overlapped, the Dzorwulu Special School focused mainly on *Role-Reversal*, while *Doubling* and *Mirroring* were explored minimally.

Duke (1974) stresses that, Psychodrama in its broad sense, as it implies in Drama in Education, is a whole family of skills, techniques and processes involved in the unrehearsed, dramatization of human problems for the purpose of dealing with them more affectionately (Duke, 1974, pp. 47-48).

Role play is a type of psycho-dramatic concept that helps to find the best behavioral response to a situation. The technique of enactment however, occasionally uses the term 'socio-drama' instead of psychodrama because in some settings the name 'Psychodrama' has unpleasant and misleading connotations.

Drama therapy as a developmental model has placed increasing demand on participants, to exhibit great resilience, insight and interpersonal capabilities. The most basic form of drama therapy is known as the creative expressive mode, where participants are motivated to exhibit their potentials to the fullest. In these improvisations, facilitators encourage spontaneity and creativity within this framework.

Blatner and Blatner (1988), notes that Adam Blatner who built his theory broadly on Moreno's ideas, also identified four main stages in psychodrama which he named the Dermal, Playful, Useful and Co-operative. Dermal; the exploratory state; Playful; the beginnings of interaction with other objects and people; Useful; where the child gains an identity, and interacts with other objects; and Co-operative; when the child functions well in a group (Blatner & Blatner, 1988, p. 49).

These concepts see creativity and spontaneity as their central ingredients that reflect a desire for more humanistic and dependable social relations. These concepts act on empathy and cross-identification; which is derived from role play and role-reversal, and expands to other facets of human consciousness. This means that therapeutic drama, begins within a person's ability to do something, then opens to multiple internal and external messages which then form a response that captures his ultimate decision.

Therapeutic drama and its related methods are designed to encourage creativity and healing in numerous contexts. Drama therapy/psychodrama among the psychotherapies has the capacity to address the widest range of issues: intra- psychic, interpersonal, emotional and cognition, spiritual and artistic. Although Moreno,

Blatner, and Jennings use different wordings for their techniques, their theories describe the same modus operandi and their works achieve the same purpose.

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 do not only place emphasis on the aesthetic aspect of our work but also on the healing.” (p.119).

This means that 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 a new meaning in a dimension of breakthrough to users.

4. Drama Therapy with the Dzorwulu Special School

A variety of creative interventions was explored in this special institution. 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 plays 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 intent of this drama was to achieve healing in the children with special needs. The activities within the scenario 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. The purpose of the use of role-reversal in all three cases is to let the children play other people’s roles. This is done not only to reconcile them with society, but also to educate society about certain undesirable behaviors and attitudes as well as other societal misconceptions about children with special needs. 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 theme was captured from the interviews, feedback and observations made during my research. The title is *The Stone that the Builders rejected*. The descriptions of the situations are centered on fathers, mothers and children respectively. The idea behind this is for all within the society to familiarize themselves with these circumstances and amend their ways. The activities for each group were simple and unique. Sample illustrations of the activities in dance-drama form in Dzorwulu special school are below.

4.1 The Stone the Builders Rejected

The Photos below illustrate the drama, in sequential order.



Figure 1: Isaac's wife has come for school fees for their child but Isaac turned them away.



Figure 2: Isaac has not been well; he collapsed on the floor and his friends are seen helping him. His friends decided to seek for help from a quack pastor.



Figure 3: The Pastor is seen praying for the sick man. The sickness aggravates even after the prayers so Isaac is rushed to the hospital.



Figure 4: Thorough examination was conducted on the patient. In the process of the examination Isaac recognized his son as the medical assistant treating him.



Figure 5: His son accompanied him to beg for pardon. The three embrace after the peace deal.

5. Analysis

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. The process, which is extremely important in this research, has afforded the children the opportunity to exhume their latent abilities. However, the end products in the form of performance also helped many people; parents, teachers, lecturers and other audience members to renew their minds about these children. Their comments during the Post Performance Discussions acknowledged the benefits derived when the creative arts are offered as tools for teaching and healing.

I believe that, if the cognitive impaired are also given the opportunity to explore diverse creative possibilities, with simple and less constraining patterns, the opportunities presented will transform their lives. The children at the Dzorwulu special school were already brilliant dancers, but incorporating drama into dance was new to them. During the initial stages of the rehearsals, the children were either focusing on the dance, while ignoring the drama or the vice-versa. However, with more practice, the children performed the actions with ease, by blending Azonto and Gawu; [a novel contemporary dance and an Ewe traditional dance in Ghana respectively].

6. Findings and Conclusion

My utmost purpose for exploring drama as therapy for cognitive impaired children is to offer them the opportunity to create and practice meaningful actions that has the capacity to enhance their intellectual, psychological, social and even physical development.

The key question is: Has the application of drama therapy and creative arts processes/practices for the children of Dzorwulu Special School been able to help exhume the latent abilities and talents in them? The study's conclusion is that the work done in Dzorwulu demonstrates this outcome is achievable. The creative processes helped them to discover interesting possibilities even beyond boundaries of drama. Beyond the official performances, some of the special needs children exhibited their talents in other areas. Contrary to the "otherness", cultural, societal and systemic negative perceptions ascribed to them, these children exceeded above expectations.

Negative attitudes and perceptions toward people with disability may not change overnight in Ghana, but every effort made to educate society about the capabilities of these children is a step in the right direction. In Dzorwulu, Isaac, who has an album of his own compositions, performed a song for the audience after the main presentation. Apparently, he was motivated by the various creative facilitations during the sessions and decided to compose his own song. The lyrics in this piece are captured as follows; *"Disability is not inability. Rise above what people think of you, and offer your best, your God-given talent. What else can you do to serve humanity? Express yourself"*. This feat may not mean anything to so many people but for me, the motivation to create 'something out of nothing' was an incredible move worth mentioning.

Children with cognitive impairment do not require complex techniques to 'master' simple actions. Flexible options rather than rigid constraints are the best options. For instance during the rehearsals, it was observed that, the children with special needs require constant practice in order to get immersed in the actions. They needed to repeat the activities continuously to achieve results.

Some children in the school also took the initiative to either exhibit their abilities in the latest 'Azonto' dance, and/or opted to give the vote of thanks or give the closing prayer. These voluntary acts show how children with cognitive impairment are also able to transfer the experiences and skills gained from participating in this research

context into other aspects of their lives. These improvisations are therefore seen as spring boards for self-exploration, self- inspiration and self-discovery.

References

- Blatner, A., & Blatner, A. (1988). *The Art of Play: An Adult's Guide to Reclaiming Imagination and Spontaneity*. New York: Human Science Press.
- Duke, C.R. (1974). *Creative Dramatic and Teaching English*. Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers in English.
- Jennings, S. (1995). *Drama therapy with Children and Adolescents*. Embodiment Projection Role (EPR). Home Rowan Sue Resource Play and Stories EPR contact.
- Moreno, J.L. (1947). *The Theatre of Spontaneity*. New York, Beacon House. National Assessment and Resource Centre. [NARC]. (2009). *Children with Special Needs in Ghana*. National Assessment and Resource Centre for Children with Disabilities and Special Needs.
- Rogers, N. (1993). *Creative Connections; Expressive Arts as Healing*. Palo Alto, California: Science & Behavior Books, Inc.
- Rubin, A.J. (1987). *Approaches to Art Therapy: Theory and Technique*. New York: Brunner/Mazel Publishers.

Tabitha Harriet Deh
EXHUMING THE LATENT ABILITIES IN THE COGNITIVE IMPAIRED IN GHANA
USING PSYCHODRAMA OR DRAMA THERAPY

Creative Commons licensing terms

Authors will retain the copyright of their published articles agreeing that a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0) terms will be applied to their work. Under the terms of this license, no permission is required from the author(s) or publisher for members of the community to copy, distribute, transmit or adapt the article content, providing a proper, prominent and unambiguous attribution to the authors in a manner that makes clear that the materials are being reused under permission of a Creative Commons License. Views, opinions and conclusions expressed in this research article are views, opinions and conclusions of the author(s). Open Access Publishing Group and European Journal of Special Education Research shall not be responsible or answerable for any loss, damage or liability caused in relation to/arising out of conflict of interests, copyright violations and inappropriate or inaccurate use of any kind content related or integrated on the research work. All the published works are meeting the Open Access Publishing requirements and can be freely accessed, shared, modified, distributed and used in educational, commercial and non-commercial purposes under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).