

DRAMA THERAPY AND THE ENGAGEMENT OF APPLIED THEATRE TECHNIQUES FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Nigeria is no doubt a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious country. This complex status therefore portends a direct impact on the philosophies, ideologies and general way of life of its people. Principally among the points of societal debate is the issue of child education and development especially as it concerns children who suffer from various forms of disabilities. This paper takes another look at the various constructs associated with how children who suffer from mental or cognitive challenges in Nigeria are educated and catered for. The study underscores the engagement of applied theatre concepts such as Psychodrama and RehabDramatics as interventionist measures in promoting healthier psychosocial activities in challenged children as well as fostering more concerted efforts from stakeholders. The case study analysis instrument of the qualitative research method is adopted for this inquiry. An applied theatre project titled, *Be Kind* is analysed as the primary source of data. The study finds that whereas, there are no full proof research outcomes or results in the engagement of the performing arts within other spheres of societal concerns; especially in a country as diverse as Nigeria, concepts such as Psychodrama and RehabDramatics provide potential research planes for the continued probe into the relationship between drama and society.

Keywords: Drama therapy, Psychodrama, RehabDramatics and Applied Theatre

Introduction

In Nigeria, as well as in most African countries, scholars seem to agree that child development takes root from the indigenous or traditional education systems that are inherent within the various socio-cultural enclaves of different societies. This further implies that the unifying structures of indigenous norms, practices and language can be activated to solve communal issues. Jonathan Mbachaga agrees when he observes that “Participatory performance on the one hand places priority on working with the people using their own mode of communication to enable small communities look at their own problems with the aim of arousing and stimulating target groups to take desired steps to improve their well-being” (87). The immediate society of a developing child plays a more important role than it is generally perceived to. Even with the influx of western education and its many inventions, African theorists seem to agree that the immediate surroundings of the child is more crucial in shaping his ideology towards life. The activities, therefore of his parents, relatives, teachers and other facilitators become an important ingredient in the development of a child. Ezenwa Ohaeto asserts that, “The representation of childhood in African art, has to be approached from the standpoint that the African concept of childhood is profoundly different from that of the western world”. (116)

Children develop socially, intellectually, morally and psychologically and the cultural backgrounds of these children play significant roles in their development. As it concerns traditional education systems in Africa, some scholars seem to agree that certain educative activities, such as imaginative play, begin from birth with the parents and other older relations playing the role of ‘leader’ or ‘teacher-animator’. From this point, children through creative play, learn to interact socially and begin to develop their imaginative tendencies as can be expressed through role-playing where they take up roles as fathers, mothers, farmers or doctors. Other ideas could likewise be expressed through mime, music, dance and others. Children meet people at home, at school or in places of worship and these relationships help to shape their ideology and perspectives about themselves and their environment.

Thus, in the circumstance where these periods of ‘self-actualization’ experiments and processes are misconstrued as “spiritual problems”, the child may be exposed to certain experiences that would further stunt positive development. Chukwudi Okoye citing Agazue Chima, on his review of Aaron Denham’s book, “Spirit Children of Northern Ghana”, observes that ethnographic pointers such as the historical, social, psychological, economic and political make up of these societies could be undeniable factors in the misconception of the children born in these localities. He recounts that:

The idea of the spirit child is intermeshed within *Nankani* material, relational and discursive worlds. A spirit child is not a human possessed by a spirit but rather is a simulacrum of a human, a spirit that only appears to be human. The spirit children are referred to as ‘snakes’ because many cannot walk; are perceived to be elusive, cunning and deceptive and are as deadly as snakes. They are often feared as spirits who took a human form with the intention of causing misfortune and destroying the family. (33)

In Nigeria, the experiences of challenged children are not different. Furthermore, research efforts bordering on Art as therapy, with particular emphasis on children who suffer from different forms of learning or cognitive disabilities such as Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) appear to be rather few. Some of the symptoms generally associated with children suffering from ADHD for example include; fidgeting with hands and feet, squirming in their seats, difficulty in sustaining attention as well as waiting in turn for given tasks, games or group situations, difficulty in following through on instructions and experiences of a wide range in mood swings. It is therefore quite relatable yet worrying as to how these symptoms can also be misconstrued as evidence of “spirit possession” in children especially in countries as culturally diverse as Nigeria.

The efficacy, therefore, of art forms such as dance and drama on issues surrounding learning deficiencies or even psychological disabilities and therapy perhaps lies in the activity and conscious involvement of thoughts and body movements to create healthy energy where qualitative psychosocial development could thrive. It has been observed that movement can be used to communicate. Thus, the ability not just to understand the meaning of bodily expressions as can be espoused through drama or dance but also to channel these art forms as therapeutic mediums, becomes imperative in inducing positive behavioural and psychological development in dealing with young children and adolescents. The drama-therapist/facilitator could for example, employ deft skill in group settings, where the participants are guided and assisted to resolve given issues through creative ways. This in turn creates an environment, for example, where the voices, stories and reflections of the participants and the group in general, play important roles in improving facilitator-participant relations and inadvertently increasing the therapeutic potential of the entire process.

Psychodrama concepts and experiments

The development of Psychodrama by Jacob Levy Moreno in 1910 was also borne out of the necessity to improve cognitive and behavioural exploration, engender healthy emotional responses and insight as well as induce therapeutic change in significant areas of human life. It is primarily an interventionist approach to character modelling and psychological development which could follow similar patterns and mediums howbeit with slight differences in structure and execution. Psychodrama is utilized as an action method which engages spontaneous dramatization through role playing and dramatic self presentation in enacting real life situations on stage. Scholars and therapists alike have argued that the integration of psychodrama in rehabilitating ‘at risk’ children and adolescents should not only improve the client-therapist therapeutic bond but should also increase client dramatic engagement and involvement in the process significantly. However, there are certain differences in the approaches of psychodrama and Drama therapy. Hod Orkibi observes that:

Clinically, in psychodrama clients typically use role-play to enact themselves, parts of themselves or significant others in their real lives and hence work more directly on their issues. In contrast, drama therapy is more fantasy-based and clients typically use role-play to enact fictional and symbolic roles, engage in storytelling, puppetry and rituals to work more indirectly and with greater distance from their issues. (47).

Scholars have maintained that psychodrama should be executed and is effective from within a group. Indeed, participants may draw connections to their own circumstances from the enactment of another's. In practice, a protagonist is chosen at each given time whose issues represent the main elements of the group. Societal issues such as stigma, unacceptance, racial discrimination etc, can be brought forward thus instigating more scenes accordingly. These scenes are enacted and repeated not just to recreate societal responses, but to educate the group on the proper responses to the same issues. Recent studies on psychodrama and its impact on children and adolescents seem to indicate an increase in dramatic engagement of the participants covered as well as improved productive behaviours. An understudy of research enquiries from Leichtentritt and Shechtman (2010), as reported by Orkibi reveals that:

In a study on Israel adolescents, bonding with the therapist contributed to outcomes more than bonding with group members. In another study, higher scores on bonding predicted decreased anxiety and aggression as well as increased social competence. In a study on group art therapy, bonding as reported by both child and therapist predicted decreases in child-reported internalizing and externalizing behavioral symptoms. (48).

In related studies, psychodrama has been utilized in building healthy interpersonal relationships and evaluating attachment concepts in young adults with a view to investigate the differences between healthy emotional relationship and psychological health. Developed by making use of the Theatre of spontaneity, Psychodrama appears to offer additional benefits other than those already known. Through the enactment of past experiences, psychodrama participants gain insight into the mental representations they have developed through the relationships they have encountered and are presently encountering. By doing so, individuals with insecure attachment values recognize the impact of these values on their relationships and alter them where necessary. Furthermore, participants may through psychodrama gain behavioural and emotional insight into their situation at the time and improve both social and empathy skills. Turkan Dogan observes that:

Participants in a self-development psychotherapy group use feedback from others and self observation to realize the important aspects, strengths and boundaries of their own interpersonal behaviours, their interpersonal conflicts and their maladaptive behaviours that attract negative reactions from others. Participants not only become aware of their personal responsibility in the shaping of interpersonal relationships but also realize their power to change them. As a method of psychotherapeutic and socio-therapeutic action, psychodrama is a particular life like form of group psychotherapy (11).

Moreno defines psychodrama as an approach which studies the existence of humanity and the realities in different life situations by using dramatic methods. Psychodrama gives individuals a chance to enact their problems rather than only talk about them (Dogan, 113). Thus, the experiences enacted in psychodrama allow participants to rehearse more ideal future circumstances while helping them live through present experiences and situations. Through the concept of realistic enactment, traumatic situations are recreated as they were in the past, however, with the re-enactment, the participants are better equipped to deal with the situation. Indeed, as Moreno cited in Dogan (2010) states, "every second experience liberates people from the first. In psychodrama, past events, future hopes and fears are transmitted to present time and resolved".(113)

The concept, thus of utilizing the *psychodramatic* approach in dealing with anxiety-related circumstances perhaps stems from Moreno's view of anxiety as being opposed to the element of spontaneity which is a vital component in psychodrama. Moreno's ideology establishes anxiety and spontaneity at opposite sides of psychological development, and that anxiety sets in because spontaneity is absent. Thus the restraint of spontaneity which the art of Drama provides stifles creativity and limits the choices of the individual; whereas, anxiety increases a state of dormancy and robotic disposition to situations. Drama therapy and attendant approaches such as Psychodrama primarily rely on descriptive, theoretical, clinical and creative performances that are significant in identifying, integrating and analyzing methods that are effective in creating desired changes in participants with challenges in psychological health. Jacques Arpin asks these questions:

What can a healer learn from Theatre and performance studies? What can Theatre and performance studies bring to healing practices? Both disciplines are distinct in Western societies; at times merge into miscellaneous forms of “art therapy”. What lessons can we learn from traditions that do not separate these competencies and have always integrated them as being naturally complementary? (355)

The *RehabDramatic* approach to child centred needs for participants with disabilities.

On the other hand, the concept of RehabDramatics proposes the coming together and utilization of the dramatic, theatrical and performance based arts, beyond the purpose of task-solving but in stimulating psychosocial improvements within each participating individual such that could foster rehabilitative possibilities in areas of self-imagery, self-representation, self-worth and social relationships. Okoye avers further that, “The infusion of these performances should therefore provide artistic content that can be identifiable and relatable to circumstances within which the participant live”. (75) The need to engage oral literature and performances within the creative process can be used to aid knowledge acquisition and rehabilitative tendencies as the medium must not appear to be delineated from the present realities of participating individuals. RehabDramatics could be engaged as an approach in the use of Drama as a medium capable of fostering Therapeutic and transformative changes. The broader concept of Drama Therapy has overtime engaged particular approaches in evaluating the various complexities of human and social behaviour as well as the need to develop avenues where artistic and performative processes can be used to improve cognitive and creative possibilities needed for qualitative psychosocial behaviour. Reknowned psychologist, Elmién Butler, states that “Drama therapy can be defined as the systematic and intentional use of drama/ theatre to achieve psychological change and growth. Manifestations of drama in the field of therapy include psychodrama, social theatre, playback theatre and movement as a linguistic activity. Drama therapy acknowledges the relevance and interdependence of health and creativity in an approach to space and healing that is interdisciplinary”. (95)

RehabDramatics, thus could be engaged within these processes with particular reference to the engagement of indigenous, artistic and performative content that is capable of not only enhancing dramatic activity and engagement, but also increasing acceptability of same through relatable communication avenues that are essential in improving therapeutic possibilities. The engagement of oral indigenous art forms is critical to this concept as it portends that the immediate society of every individual, and by extension its norms, cultural practices, languages and traditions is capable of influencing individual perceptions and behaviour of its citizens and thus, could be infused along with other dramatic activities and processes to engender new approaches that could foster positive rehabilitative change.

The different misconceptions about how young persons who live with varied degrees of physical or mental challenges are perceived and/or understood is also observed to have given rise to ideological conflicts as well as social attitudes and practices. Theatre, thus can be utilized in bringing the practices to the fore using the immediacy that the dramatic medium provides in activating needed interactions, conversations and mobilized action on issues ranging from Abuse, depression, bullying to lack of adequate information and misconstrued communal practices.

The “Be Kind” Project, Salvation Army Rehabilitation Center, Oredo Edo State

The Applied theatre project was carried out at the Salvation Army Rehabilitation center located at Oredo, Edo State. Cited close to the Salvation Army Church as a mission project to the community, the facility houses children and Adolescents with various health challenges ranging from physical and mental disabilities. A greater percentage of these individuals who also reside at the center, are from Edo State while others come from different states in the country. The project’s objective was explained to and approved by the Director and other officials of the center. The researcher also interacted with some would be participants to ascertain levels of willingness to be part of the project as well as to understand the peculiarity of challenges each individual is faced with. In further interactive sessions that followed, participants zeroed in on addressing themes of bullying and discrimination hence, the workshop title,

“Be kind”. The project thus adopted the engagement of storytelling sessions embellished with performative dramatic actions repeated intermittently to engender retained interest. The workshop was initially approved for 3 months but lasted for 2 months with a contact period of 90 minutes, once every week.

“Be kind” is a fictitious tale about an arrogant prince in a faraway kingdom who treats everyone around him with disdain and disrespect. He is very unlike his younger brother who is kind hearted, humble and respectful to elders. With the demise of their father, the king of the land, the community is thrown into worry and fear over the arrogant prince becoming king over them. However on the day of coronation, just as the crown prince is about to be crowned, the chief priest halts the ceremony and with the help of the people subdues and banishes the arrogant prince from the land. The kind and good natured prince is then crowned in his place and the people live happily ever after.

Therapeutic engagements through the project, *Be Kind*.

Activities at the Salvation Army rehabilitation center, *Oredo* provided the researcher and participants unique perspectives in adopting interactive techniques that would foster increased engagements and participation. Observations within the first 2 weeks revealed that though 14 children and young adults had indicated interest in participating in the Applied drama workshop; physical exertions, mobility and cognitive comprehension posed a significant challenge. For children with mental challenges such as Down syndrome and so on, the ability to remember actions or words learnt in previous sessions proved too much in some circumstances. However, having adopted performative storytelling sessions in which elaborate dramatic actions and gestures were intermittently infused, increased reactions and imitations were elicited. The researcher infused activities such as games, singing sessions, pantomime and dramatic representations in order to engender qualitative participation as well as evaluate individual response to certain themes, beliefs and practices. Indeed, these activities were developed and carried out by members of the facility; utilising known songs, chants and expressions from within the community. The songs were taught with the assistance from members of staff and the participants themselves. One of the songs learnt during dramatic engagements within the project reads thus;

Waya Kugbe Oh

Song	Translation
<i>Waya kugbe oh</i>	Everyone let’s come together in unity
<i>Waya ko kugbe</i>	It is God that created all of us
<i>Waya kugbe</i>	Both those that can see/walk
<i>Osalobua oyi maya</i>	And those that can’t
<i>Ke ne hia o</i>	We are all one in the sight of God
<i>O ke n nhia</i>	
<i>Osalobua eh moyi maya oh</i>	

The use of folk media within the dramatic process seeks to validate the communal perception of certain phenomena and thus foster a sense of consciousness on what is expected from society in dealing with these issues to forestall a possible breakdown of order or the loss of the virtue of humaneness within the society. Within performance, it is observed that folk songs possess distinct functionality in conveying deep messages as well as increasing dramatic action and participation within the developmental process. Ikenna Onwuegbuna observes that “although the functionality of music can be ascertained from a myriad of perspectives, it is in the textual content and performance practices of folk songs that the general world view of a people is exposed”(1). The essence of creativity within the application of folk media also provides as a veritable spectrum for transformation and rehabilitative endeavours to be engendered. Jakobson and Bogatyrev state that, “Creativity is expressed here as much as in the selection of appropriated works as in their adaptation for other conventions and expectations. Established literary forms following their transference to folklore, become the raw materials for transformation”. (13)

Thus, it could be further observed and should be reiterated that the engagement of folksongs during processes of dramatic re-enactment and rehearsals, was a very critical component of the applied theatre

project in Oredo. This was not only because of its infusion as a scene changing medium, but as an activity in line with the objective of the concept of RehabDramatics in utilizing identifiable material from within the environment of the participants so as to ensure increased participation in the process. Also, the efficacy of the songs accompanied by music and dance proved important in re-enforcing desired messages that could foster improved mental retention of the production goals that would otherwise have been lost without them. This to a certain degree was achieved in the project as reported by the director of the Salvation Army Rehabilitation center at the end of the project;

Major Chukwunwem: “Maybe it is the music mixed with the dramatization, but I think the children were able to learn something. You know some of the ailments they suffer from here are degenerative in nature, so they do need these kind of activity to excite them and keep their mind busy”.

Further observations of the drama project also revealed how the roles played by care giving institutions in the psychosocial development of challenged children can be utilized as a catalyst for productive engagements with community members on different issues surrounding them. On one side of this role is the place of community practices and norms which as we have seen earlier through the introduction of folk performances sourced from the immediate society, provides as a bridge in addressing existing practices that may be putting these children at more risk. Indeed, during the rehearsals and interactive sessions of the “Be kind” project, the staff of the Salvation Army Rehabilitation center, Oredo, assisted in the provision and performance of these songs and story material which reinforced the central idea being explored. The essence of these efforts were to revisit throbbing issues concerning stereotypical or even taboo references to for example, children with Down syndrome or other neurological disabilities. Indeed, as Rose Jacobson and Geoff McMurchy state; “Stereotypes surrounding disability have dominated the world of art, myth and historical imagery. Twentieth century depictions alone remind us of the tasks that lie ahead for those working to change attitude and representations” (3). Quoting Kazumi Tsuruoka, Jacobson and McMurchy query further:

What does integration mean in a society where the disabled are still largely seen as “freaks”? I have become a radical. I believe that nothing short of revelation can transform the collective mindset of my non-disabled brothers and sisters. Fear is the biggest obstacle to freedom and I am no longer afraid to be seen. I’m not asking you to like me, only see me as I am. Prepare for relationship, not symbols. That is what I have to offer (3).

The other side of the role of institutions with the mandate of caring for challenged individuals is that of organising systems, education and training of personnel so as to further equip them in managing peculiar challenges or disabilities that may generally be misconstrued by the larger community. Though the Rehabilitation center, *Oredo* had a resident medical officer, it was observed that other members of staff were volunteers from the Salvation Army Mission and were not as knowledgeable on medical issues. There is no doubt that the lack of proper education about particular disabilities may invariably increase the chances of wrong perceptions, attitudes and behaviour from the persons concerned. As has also been noted with the “spirit children” phenomenon in parts of Ghana and southern Nigeria where there have incidences of child mutilation and even filicide largely due to wrong assumptions and fuelled by poor education about these disabilities.

The *Oredo* project afforded the facilitators the opportunity to explain the purpose of the project through advocacy sessions and outline the lineup of activities for willing participants. Paramount was that the anonymity of the children were guaranteed; pictures were not taken to ensure the safety of the participants. Another of such efforts was also detailed through an approval letter which was signed by the director of the center and shown below;

Conclusion

The approach of RehabDramatics thus, moves to be a medium for the engagement of arts in evaluating behaviour borne out of stereotypical, socio-cultural and communal conjectures such that peculiarities related to the varied forms of disabilities and challenges are better understood and represented. There

is greater need for public enlightenment and the importance of specialized care for the various strands of mental health or neurological disabilities such as Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder ADHD, General Anxiety Disorder GAD, Schizophrenia, Down syndrome etc, especially in countries like Nigeria.

Applied Theatre concepts like RehabDramatics and Psychodrama could thus be effective in bringing these issues forward in a bid to provide community education among others and in engaging challenged children and adolescents on issues ranging from self-representation to qualitative responses and societal practices. There is no doubt that even in formal educational establishments such as schools, students with certain disabilities are always holding up the short end of the stick because there is no pragmatic effort in promoting inclusivity in addressing the needs of these individuals. Indeed, as Sultan Kilinc, Kathleen Farrand and others report that, "Although students with disabilities are physically included in general education classrooms, they often cannot engage in meaningful learning activities, which limits their participation and leads to their marginalization and exclusion within classroom contexts.(432); it is therefore imperative for countries like Nigeria with diverse cultural connotations on the subject of education, to harness community constructs and practices in such a way that compliment efforts of formal and non formal educational institutions to particularise learning and care to the child's need and peculiarity.

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PLATE 1

**DEPARTMENT OF THEATRE AND FILM STUDIES. NNAMDI AZIKIWE UNIVERSITY,
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PMB 5025, AWKA, ANAMBRA STATE, NIGERIA**

External Memorandum

To: Director Salvation Army Rehabilitation, Center No 20, First East Circular Road, Oredo LGA Edo State.	From: Okoye Chukwudi Michael (Reg. No. 2015107011P Department of Theatre and film studies, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.
Date: 15 th Oct. 2018	<i>approved for 3 months</i>

**APPLICATION TO USE YOUR CENTER FOR THE RESEARCH ON THE UTILIZATION
OF APPLIED THEATRE ACTIVITIES AS AN INTERVENTIONIST MECHANISM FOR
CHILD DEVELOPMENT**

I wish to apply for the above subject matter in your establishment.

This research work is basically aimed at integrating the applied drama approach to the discourse of child learning and development. The study discusses in detail the potential of dramatic activities not just as an entertainment or educative tool but as being capable of rehabilitating at risk children by engendering improvement in psychosocial skills and development healthier responses to environmental issues situate in Nigeria.

The study will be relying on a number of theories and concepts in the actualization of the research work. They are the theories of Transformative learning, The Psychodrama approach to development, the theory of metacognition and self regulation and the Interpretative Phenomenological approach.

The researcher in course of this research work intends to carry out interactive and enactment with 20 children between the ages of 10 – 15 and engage the concepts of Theatrical spontaneity through games, songs, play and so on to ascertain levels of dramatic self representation in dealing with the present realities of problem solving as experienced by traumatized or at risk children and adolescents in Nigeria.

The study is purely for research purposes only and as such the identities and privacy of the participants will be well protected.

For your kind consideration.

Yours faithfully,



Chukwudi Michael Okoye.

*Received by Major Bramwell
Chukwudi Michael Okoye 19/10/2018*

THE SALVATION ARMY
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