



The Harmonizing Roles of the Arts and Healing with the Autistic: A Study of the Autism Awareness, Care and Training Center in Haatso, Ghana

Dr. Tabitha Harriet Deh, Rev. Fr. Dr. Aaron Yeboah Annan, Dr. Felicia Owusu-Ansah

Department of Theatre Arts, School of Performing Arts, College of Humanities, University of Ghana. Legon. West-Africa.

ABSTRACT

Drama in education, as a classroom-based methodology, fundamentally helps to expound on problematic subjects and to make learning delightful. The dramatic processes are aimed at developing skills of imagination, spontaneity, and mental flexibility. These skills are geared towards personal development; self-discovery and self-esteem. Autism on the other hand is a condition or a developmental disability that affects communication, social interacting and repetitive behavior.

According to Stuart Duncan, "Autism is not a disability, it is a different ability. (Stuart 2023). Scientists believe there are multiple causes of autism spectrum disorder that acts together to change the most common ways people develop. Diagnosing ASD can be very difficult since there is no medical test like a blood test to diagnose the disorder. ASD can sometimes be detected at 18 months after birth or even younger. However, many children do not receive a final diagnosis until they are much older.

Drama therapy, psychodrama and the expressive arts therapies are all creative devices explored primarily to achieve healing. The tentacles of these strategies encompass other jurisdictions to include Clinical Psychology and Neuroscience. Clinical Psychology came into existence with the outstanding contributions and efforts to respect and treat all humankind with dignity and respect to ensure healthy human development. Neuroscience has also made us aware of the two hemispheres; and how the right hemisphere or the right brain is more inclined to artistic or visual imagery, and processes more intuitively, holistically and randomly. Drama therapy is a developmental model that places increasing demand on participants to demonstrate great spontaneity, flexibility, intuition and interactive capabilities in creative processes to achieve healing. My students are encouraged to do their volunteer work, and extension works in various regular and special needs schools to help others.

KEYWORDS: *Drama Therapy, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), cognitive impairment, Asperger's syndrome, neurodevelopmental disorder.*

INTRODUCTION

Over the years when I started working with the cognitive impaired in Ghana through my research works, it became important to note that therapeutic drama is very beneficial to children with special needs. In Applied Theatre, this research materialized and Drama Therapy as a novel course of study under the Drama in Education was introduced to the students of the Theatre Arts Department in 2019. The initial aim was to train students in this field to be able to work on their fundamental mental health issues as regular individuals whilst doing other volunteer work with the special needs and people living with disabilities in the various segregated institutions in Ghana. The creative approaches employed in therapeutic engagements have been expressed vividly through improvisation, storytelling, mime, games etc. to achieve healing and development. Drama Therapy as a very

insightful course gives a broad perspective to therapy and utilizes various methods and processes that help to achieve healing and development. Students in my final year classes can make connections within the perspectives derived at the end of the day in whatever they wish to express and how to engage it.

Drama therapy is a developmental model that places increasing demand on participants to demonstrate great spontaneity, flexibility, intuition and interactive capabilities in creative processes to achieve healing. While these Drama Therapy students are working to develop themselves and resolve their mental health issues, they are also encouraged to do volunteer work, and extension works in various regular and special needs schools to help others as well. As an educator of Drama in Education and Drama Therapy, my ultimate aim is to help my students discover themselves,

build their confidence and be able to work with every creative strategy in any domain, as they discover themselves.

My previous research explored Therapeutic Drama with children with Cognitive impairment. My major finding was that, although most societies tend to value more highly the verbal, sequential and analytical skills of the left hemisphere, the right hemisphere, where artistic, visual and simultaneous abilities are housed, is the best alternative for cognitive impaired children. As these students do these community volunteering, it is also seen as research that is focused on exploring their expertise in the arts to bring out the latent artistic side of these special needs children who may never know the enormous acumen they possess. The deep thought in this research has been rooted in unique therapeutic practices which may not be concerned with curative measures but in the holistic restoration of these users. The need, therefore, to confront issues through alternative forms of expression, gave birth to these creative therapeutic approaches.

In the research in which I explored therapeutic drama, as an aspect of Drama in Education to heal and improve upon the lifestyle of children with special needs, mainly in the category of cognitive impairment at three segregated institutions in Ghana. These institutions include the Dzorwulu Special School, the Echoing Hills, and the Three Kings Special School. In the above-mentioned institutions, down syndrome was dominant. In Ghana, these children have frequently suffered rejection, isolation, stigmatization, and marginalization, and have often been branded under the notion that 'nothing good can come out of them'. The study employed drama therapy, which encourages creativity and spontaneity, and action methods in varied techniques for children to attain healing in the context of revitalizing the situations in which these children find themselves, so that the creative activities they are involved in become symbolic in their adjunct healing methods.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a mental condition, usually present from childhood. The condition is characterized by a complete self-absorption and a reduced ability to respond to or communicate with the outside world. Autistics have difficulty in transmitting information but in extreme cases they possess very high IQ and high intelligence in such conditions as Asperger's syndrome. (Greenspan, 1995, p. 462). Symptoms of this developmental condition include the following: a great ability to maintain masses of information but lack the ability to communicate with others and mix with groups in their age. Autism was first identified by Kanner in 1943 as a childhood syndrome, characterized by autistic aloneness, obsession with routine and profound problems with communication. Asperger's syndrome (AS) was first described by Hans Asperger in 1944. Asperger's differs from classic autism in those diagnosed with it. Asperger's do not show evidence of deficiency in communication or language delay. Asperger's disorder at the mild end of the spectrum,

was identified in the early Nineteen-ninety's [1990's] by Lorna Wing, who first observes aspects of autism among other neurological conditions, as first and foremost a natural variation; then a neuro-diversity condition, demanding recognition and acceptance (Kanner, 2005, pp. 76-205). For Wing, high-functioning autism should neither be regarded as a disorder, a disability nor as an undesirable condition per se, but rather as a condition with a particular vulnerability.

Asperger's syndrome is one of the disorders on the Autism spectrum – a milder form of the condition. In taxonomy of autism, those with Asperger's syndrome have average and very high IQs, while those with other autistic conditions suffer from mild to severe mental retardation. At the less fortunate end of the spectrum is what diagnosticians call profoundly affected children. This group of Autistic children, if not forcibly engaged, spends their waking hours in trancelike states, staring at lights, rocking chairs, making high pitched squeaks and totally absorbed in their own world. The core psychological deficit is an inability to attach emotion (affect or intent) to planning, sequencing and processing capacities; and fostering this ability is key to developmental progress (Artwood, 1998; Greenspan, Wiede, & Simon, 1998, p. 117). The person with Asperger's syndrome has no distinguishing physical features but is primarily viewed by other people as different because of their unusual quality of social behaviors and conversational greetings. Autism researchers in neuroscience are also firm on the idea that autism results from abnormal communications between the brain region rather than a broken part of the brain. Studies are largely suggestive of this, but skeptics say that connectivity theory has not yet got to the bottom of Autism.

Hiedi Morgan 2019, Connections between Sensory Sensitives in Autism, have shown that sensory-friendly environments also improve accessibility for those with mental illness and sensory processing disorders. (Hiedi 2019)

Autistic people have difficulties in understanding social cues and maintaining reciprocal conversations. Some children engage in repetitive or restricted behaviors as a means of self-regulation or self-soothing. Visual support, structured schedules and clear communication are effective strategies in supporting their transition and help reduce anxiety. Hence, providing a clear and consistent communication, offering reassurance and being patient can greatly assist the autistic individuals adapt to change.

Research is still going on and perhaps a new approach to molecular studies of the disease might look for genes that perturb the development of neuro-connections rather than the genes that map specific behaviors. Although glaring problems appear in social interaction, serious shortcomings also show up in reasoning task that require integrating different types of information (Wickelgren, 2005, pp. 1856-1858). Autism is one disorder that mystified researchers, parents, doctors and scientists alike, because of the diverse deficits and occasional talents that accompany it. Although

the glaring problems mostly appear in social interactions, serious shortcomings also show up. Autistic individuals may memorize facts easily but may find complex concepts elusive.

The idea that faulty connections are at the core of autism is implied in Psychological Theory proposed in the 1980s by developmental neuropsychologist addressed in paper by Frith (2002) who reported the evidence of connectivity problems in autism. He explains that many autistic conducts can be explained as a person obsessed with details, and not integrating the particulars, whether they are words, facts, or visual details to determine their broader meaning. Frith theorized that, this tendency resulted from a lack of 'top down' mental processing in the autistic brain; the brain's frontal lobes, which play a central role in organizing, planning, directing attention, and guiding behavior not communicating properly with more detail to the oriented areas at the back of the brain (Frith, 2002, pp. 1860-1868). Connectivity problems in autism might be an effect rather than cause. An earlier dysfunction in the brain, such as deficit in the brain systems that govern social rewards can affect an infant's attention, face and speech, and can influence the development of speech and face perception, which ultimately will affect the development of complex functions, and integrate brain circuitry that underlies language and development.

Autism is indeed a heartbreaking condition. "It is distressing to realize that your child may never; feel empathy, forge good friendships, fall in love, find an interesting career, nurture children, and contribute to society in what the rest of us see as core to human intercourse and happiness. It is heartbreaking daily, to try to reach through to this person; giving so much, and getting so little in return" (Beals, 2008, pp. 32-39). Medical sciences are finding answers to the numerous unanswered questions concerning autism and social science researchers are also seeking solutions to the communication problems. Collectively, the goal is the optimism that the world will reach that level someday if not with science; the arts are willing to pursue ways of finding answers as well.

Grandin (2006) notes that; "If I could snap my fingers and be non-autistic, I would not; Autism is part of what I am". Autism can also have desirable and enabling consequences, both to the individual and society. Today, in raising the standards, Einstein for example, who did not speak for three years, would not have been successful. Would a Physics Journal accept a paper from an unknown clerk today? Several famous scientists, musicians, engineers, and artists had learning problems or were on the Autism Spectrum. Many highly functioning autistic and Asperger's or dyslexic students who go into successful careers, did not only inspire themselves, they also had teachers who motivated them to succeed. Good teachers try different methods and use the one that works for a particular child. Good teachers are worth their weight in gold (Grandin, 2006, pp. 229-234). Well, this argument about teachers may be contested passionately today in Ghana.

Vats, J.H. (2016) reiterates that, "autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental disorder that affects communication and behavior". Although autism can be diagnosed at any age, it is considered a neurodevelopmental disorder. The signs of Autism typically appear during early childhood and can affect a person's social skills, communication, and behaviors. Autism is caused by differences in the brain, something you're born with. ASD can cause significant social, communication and behavioral challenges, as well as diverse strengths or difficulties. Everyone with autism is affected differently, that is why autism is described as spectrum disorder. (Vats, 2016). Many schools of thought believe that autism has no cure.

Conclusions are that, out of every 36 children born, one is autistic. The Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDCP, 2022) also mentioned in a recent article that people with ASD often have problems with social communication and interaction, and restricted nonrepetitive behaviors or interests. People with ASD may also have different ways of learning, moving, or paying attention. These characteristics can make life very challenging. It is important to note that some people without ASD might also have some of these symptoms. (CDCP, 2022). This practice is a creative orientation which helps the students who participate directly in creative activities to become more psychological, socially, physically and emotionally vigilant (Baoi J 2022; Prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder among children).

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

To introduce the use of various expressive arts as therapeutic forms to foster healing and development.

To establish the role of creativity among special needs individuals and improve communal acceptance.

Research Questions

To what extent will the introduction of various expressive arts as therapeutic forms foster healing and development.

How has the role of creativity among special needs individuals improve their communal acceptance.

Significance of Study

A recent, study with my students at the Autism Awareness Care and Training (AACT) in Haatso-Accra brings us closer to another group of cognitive impairment, autism. For these students to bring about healing and relaxation whilst achieving the goal of acquiring new knowledge, varied use the artistic models derived from unique strategies are explored to achieve therapy in the form of good mental health, social welfare and development. For the past two years my students and I have been doing our voluntary works with the AACT Center.

Few years back, Acting Dean of the School of Performing Arts: Professor Awo Mana Asiedu nominated three lecturers from the Departments of Theatre Arts, Music and Dance to work with the Autism Awareness Care and Training Centre.

Since I have already been doing volunteer work, especially with the cognitive impaired, my selection with the team only augmented my work. Using creative approaches such as creative dramatics, storytelling, mime, games, dance and music, our work progressed in earnest to achieve healing and development.

The coordinator of programs at the center, during the orientation with my students has emphasized that 'developing students and caregivers' capacities as a developmental paradigm will go a long way to help progressively alongside other methods towards physical, cognitive, emotional and social development of all. Mr. Abeiku Grant gave an in-depth orientation about the center. According to him, Autism Awareness Care and Training Center, (AACT) was founded by Serwaa Quainor, who had an autistic child while living in the United States. She moved back to Ghana when her son was twelve years old and couldn't find a school for him to attend here. This compelled her to start one that would suit his needs. She did just that and even supported a teacher to travel to the US to get the required training needed to support her child and others. The school took off at her home with five (5) children. Her decision to 'act' inspired the name of the center, AACT. By 1999, the school became a formal establishment situated at Kokomlemle, Accra. It has functioned successfully since then and in December 2020 it was resituated to their current location, Haatso.

This new facility is because of donations made by several donor groups as well as parents. Mr. Grant explained the vision of the institute as follows: "To have a society that is more inclusive and sensitive to the needs of persons with autism, that each child is different and every child has his / her own potential, the center, being fully aware of this, does everything within its means, to assign an attendant per child, to help each child discover and develop their potentials. Grant again explained to the students that the internal and external sensory comes in eight dimensions, and autistic children have challenges with some of these senses. In some cases, the extent of the challenges varies from mild, moderate to severe conditions. Autism, he said, is diagnosed as three main ways; Communication deficit; including expressing their feelings, social interaction deficit; relating to social settings in rather unusual ways; subtle and intrusive. Restrictive or repetitive behavior where they are routine-oriented; when their routines are altered, they get agitated and sometimes even result in too violent behaviors. (Grant, A. 2023, unpublished material).

Some of these activities include independent living skills programs, such as basic daily needs like bathing, brushing their teeth, washing their utensils after eating, etc. Vocational skills program comprising of activities that enhance skills like sewing, bead making, painting, playing musical instruments etc. Functional academic skills like teaching the children to apply numeracy and literacy skills. This activity begins with teaching these children their age, address, phone number, currency, measurement, buying and selling etc. Talent

development program: developing talents in music, art, and other crafts, and raising awareness, which is very crucial to the center, this is done by engaging and enabling of society to be more accommodating to people with autism.

During the last year 2023 Christmas celebrations, the children at the Autism center, performed the charismas play, narrating the story the birth of Jesus through Improvisation, Picture-Stories and Choreographic dances. My students also participated directly, and in so doing they became more psychologically, socially, physically and emotionally alert and ready to work in their various communities to bring about healing and development.

The wish of the students is to expand their jurisdiction of work to other facilities in Ghana. The aim is to broaden their outlook so that they can survive with developmental models to exhibit great flexibility, insight and interpersonal capabilities while working with the autistic. Together we can do more than I can as an individual. For the past two years my students and I have been doing our voluntary works with the Autism Awareness Care and Training Center (AACT) in Haatso-Accra. As an educator of Drama in Education and Drama Therapy, my aim is to help my students discover themselves, build their confidence and be able to use the strategies in any domain they find themselves. The need therefore to confront issues through alternative forms of expression gave birth to these creative therapeutic alternatives for all to embrace.

CONCLUSION

Drama therapy has consequently become a probable education tool for intervention to achieve change, development and transformation. In these therapeutic processes, children with special needs are encouraged to develop their artistic potential regardless of their intellectual inadequacies so that their handicaps become tolerable to allow development to proceed. This practice as a creative orientation helps the students who participate directly in the creative activities to become more psychologically, socially, physically and emotionally alert. For the students to bring about healing and relaxation whilst achieving the goal of acquiring knowledge, they use the artistic models derived from their unique strategies to achieve therapy in the form of good mental health, social well-being and development for themselves and others. The arts and healing are seen as manifesting two complementary positions and when they merge with intent, they do not oppose one another; they collaborate as a mirror through which society can view itself by making amends to achieve healing and growth.

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