



Looking Through the Eyes of the Cognitive Impaired in Ghana – The Creative Connections and the Expressive Arts in Context

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ABSTRACT

This paper takes a closer look at how the components of the Expressive Arts; dance, drama, music, visual art etc., disclose enormous potential in effecting positive attitudinal and behavioral change in its users. This research explores creativity, as a potential for change in three different special needs Schools in Ghana. The study also juxtaposes the creative connections of Rogers, (2004) with the Expressive Arts to attain thriving results. The Expressive Arts are therefore potential teaching tools for intervention to achieve change and transformation in these users. In these creative processes, the children are encouraged to develop their artistic potentials regardless of their intellectual shortfalls to allow development to proceed so that, the innate latent capacities of these special needs children are extracted and improved raptly to achieve healing, empowerment and self-development.

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Introduction

The Arts and Healing in Indigenous African Cultures

Many schools of thought hold the notion that, ancient cultures did not disconnect their arts from their healing processes. The understanding implicitly is that, all stages of human development have relied on the arts to make live worth living. From time immemorial, including the pre-colonial era, Africans and for that matter Ghanaians have relied on music, dance, drum language, symbols, folk songs, proverbs, games, story-telling, drama and many other indigenous cultural artistic practices for their well-being. People dance, play various games, do acrobatics, sing folk songs, tell interesting stories, for recreational or motivational purposes, for self-gratification, and to release tension or while doing certain strenuous or tedious jobs and/or communal labor. All these are done not just to entertain but also to inspire and to keep up with life's challenges. As Rogers (1993) rightly puts it;

Ancient cultures did not separate their arts from healing. It was all one and the same thing... dance, song, visual art were part of everyday life and it was understood that all aspects of the self must participate in life to make it a whole. p. 96

Drama and other expressive arts are key educative tools in this research exposes these special needs children to a variety of expressive arts to help them to confront issues, challenging experiences and situations that may otherwise hinder their development.

Facing the Challenges with the Cognitive Impaired in Ghana

The presence of a special child with cognitive impairment in a marriage or family brings about many problems. Marital difficulties usually arise with irritations and other disruptions of the family unit. Some parents even go to the extent of showing negative personality reactions to the

child's deficient abilities and this makes it very difficult for a wholesome relationship to be developed in the family.

Children with intellectual disability are disregarded both culturally and socially and are labeled severally in Ghana. The names denote 'imbecile' or 'foolishness'. Below are examples in some Ghanaian languages. "Gyimigyimi" in Akan, "Ebolu" or "Ebagyimi" in Nzema, "Buulu" or "Musu" in Ga, "Budumu" in Sisala, "Odamite" in Dangme, "Tafrakye Tagbormadator" or "Ehorvi" in Ewe and "Esabalto" in Gonja. Undesirable experiences such as; rejection, marginalization, stigmatization, hidden disabled, and infanticide which are recognized as the negative cultural and social perceptions these children suffer. (Deh, 2016).

One system employed for handling such children was *infanticide*; killing of the infant child. The infant is most often abandoned at the river bank, near the sea or in thick forests with food such as mashed yam and boiled eggs. A gun was then fired into the air, believing that the child would then change into its real form-snake, (reptile) eat the food, and crawl back into the forest, river or sea. Spiritualists or juju men were assumed to be experts in carrying out such rituals successfully. (Danquah, 1976, pp. 40-45).

It is also not a myth that, prior to taking their wards to the Psychiatric Hospital, most parents sought help and healing from shrines, herbalists, and spiritual churches due to their superstitious beliefs.

The Dualist Theory of the African and for that matter, the Ghanaian, which emphasizes on *physical* and *spiritual* healing as a form of attaining holistic restoration, is explained by Mbiti (1990), that; "the medicine man applies both physical and spiritual treatment" (p.165). What this means is that, health care delivery to the indigenous African is all-inclusive, and must involve healing the person's spiritual as well as the physical components of the being.

The general belief in most African societies is that sickness, disease and misfortune may be caused by ill-will or ill-action; through the agency of witchcraft, or other wicked spirits. The medicine man is therefore expected to diagnose and ascertain the sickness and apply prompt treatment and/or supply precautionary measures to avoid future occurrences.

Opoku (1978) also refers to the *Theory of Causation*, and explains why the indigenous African wants to find out 'why things happen'. This notion symbolizes that, disease as well as illness, epidemic, drought, misfortune and even death may be caused by a broken relationship between human beings and supernatural beings. Finding solutions, prevention and cure therefore, involve the physical, the organic and the spiritual (Opoku 1978, pp.145-149).

This mutual dependency between the physical and the spiritual is so essential to the Ghanaian so much so that, the typical traditional African sees his survival as a result of his ability to harmonize both physical and the spiritual aspects of life. Any malfunctioning of one aspect; either the spirit or the physique will therefore have direct impact on the other and the vice-versa.

The pioneering works in Clinical Psychology in Ghana had indeed demonstrated the effectiveness of psychological interventions in treating clients suffering from various mental health disorders. Surveys conducted heightened revelations about parents, families and society's attitudes, behaviors and perceptions about mental retarded children in Ghana. Outcomes reveal that, the association of mental retardation to spiritual and societal misfortunes, and curses by supernatural beings, punishment from the gods, evil spirits, and malevolent human beings who have powers of witchcraft or sorcery (juju) are still real in Ghana. (Danquah, 2014)

Positive attitudes may not necessarily change the child's conditions, but can transform his/her situations and create conducive atmosphere for healing to proceed. This achievement may be linked to more clinical education of families and the development of special education and other creative forms of education in Ghana to reinforce the fact of declining negative attitudes and perception of people in Ghana.

The Creative Connections' Interventions

Drama therapy and play therapy employed processes such as role-play, mime, improvisation storytelling, games, puppetry etc. to achieve its purpose. In her concept of *Embodiment*, *Projection* and *Role*, Jennings as a developmental paradigm initiator works progressively alongside other methods towards physical, cognitive, emotional and social development. Jennings (1995). In this process, the child/user is able to enter the world of imagination and symbolism, and works towards growth, identity and independence.

Therapeutic drama with developmental models, have increasing demands placed on participants, to exhibit great resilience, insight and interpersonal capabilities in the creative works. The most basic form; the creative expressive mode, motivates participants to exhibit their potentials to the fullest in order to achieve great success. In these improvisations facilitators encourage spontaneity and creativity in the process.

Rogers (1993), who developed a process called the Creative Connections notes that "every human being has the capacity to be creative". This process interweaves all the expressive arts such as drama, dance, arts, poetry, writing etc. to reclaim the vital parts of the self. Her believe is that

expressing oneself through one art form stimulates and nurtures other forms, and that part of the therapeutic process in human awakens the creative energy. Her main focus is to integrate and connect all the arts as a healing process that can be explored to benefit humanity.

The idea is to offer safe nurturing environment for self-exploration, insight and communication to various stake holders; such as educators, parents and psychotherapists. In doing so, the process of creativity and consciousness then, can unlock the creative abilities effectively and connect the various expressive arts extensively for development.

My intent in doing the projects in the three schools and others that I anticipate to explore in future is to empower the individual users and encourage them to accept, develop, and explore the arts effectively for development. This means that whether it is music, dance/ movement, drama/ improvisation, art, poetry or writing, these art forms must not just remain as separate entities that can only be admired, but they must be collaborative tools in the effective discovery of people's unique potentials. These potentials will then connect to the inner core and reach out to the world at large.

The use of the expressive arts as therapy can only be achieved in a favorable environment, devoid of 'blocks to creativity'. These blocks include the 'inner critic', 'need for approval', 'fear of failure' and 'fear of the unknown'. The process of creativity enhances the participants to make full use of their potentials, not only from the mind but also from the senses. In this case, the mind, the body, the emotions and the spirit are all at work to discover total healing for both the self as well as for others. She confirms this in the following lines. (Rogers, pp.20-24)

This means that the creative interventions, begin with a person's ability to do something, then opens to multiple internal and external messages which then form responses that capture the users' ultimate decision.

The creative interventions with children in three special schools in Ghana; the Echoing Hills Special Foundation and the Dzorwulu Special School, both in Accra, and the Three Kings Special School in Battor in the Volta Region are introduced to improvisations in the expressive arts. These improvisations include dance-drama, drama improvisation, poetry, games, drawing and collage making. The creative action's concentrations emphasize more on spontaneity within the group work.

Initially, the project intended to use solely drama inclined processes but as the projects unfold, other aspects of the expressive arts were added on. This is because the unique latent abilities and interests of each group were taken into consideration and depending on their creative capabilities, the techniques differ. The practical experiences of children with different conditions under cognitive impairment; in *Dzorwulu Special School*, in Accra, the *Three Kings Special School* in Battor in the Volta Region, and the *Echoing Hills Special Institution* also in Accra, are introduced to improvisations that are varied due to the uniqueness of each group. These improvisations include dance-drama, drama improvisation, poetry, games, drawing and collage making. The creative action's concentrations emphasize more on the process during the group work, rather than individualized styles. Nevertheless individuals also benefit from these improvisations.

In *Dzorwulu Special School*, the children loved dancing so dance-drama and mime were employed. In *Echoing Hills Village*, there were other conditions such as visual

impairment, physically challenged, autistics as well as the intellectually impaired, and this informed the usage of a variety of the expressive arts; such as drama, poetry, drawing and collage. *The Three Kings Special School* employed improvisational drama with dialogue because most of the special needs children do not have speech problems.

The creative connections maybe said to be the enhancing interplay among dance/movement, drama/improvisation, art, writing and music. For example dancing with awareness opens us to profound feelings which can then be expressed in color, line or form, or writing immediately after art or dance gives more understanding to the work. These processes stimulate self-exploration, where one's feelings are tapped to become a resource for further self-understanding that awakens us to new possibilities. Although in this current project, the students were not able to express these connections in detail, this can be achieved in subsequent ones given further opportunities.

The creative process therefore, should make people explore, experiment, mess around with materials and play with them so that a fulfilling and joyous source of creativity can help to achieve the healing process. This is because the collaboration of the expressive arts is able to help solve problems instantly if it is utilized effectively and efficiently.

Below is a drawing I did at one time while listening to music and imagining how I want to see the cognitive impaired progress in life. This is to show that impossibilities can be made possible for the cognitive impaired in our part of the world. It is not common to see flowers with different petals growing on branches like it is drawn in the picture. This is how I want to see the cognitive impaired - to see them blossom in the midst of cultural and social inhibitions in Ghana.

My interpretation hinges on what I am trying to communicate to the outside world. Although the interpretation may be subjective, the ability to make sense of this picture is crucial and must go beyond the visible work. My inferences may be accurate or flawed, but the most significant thing is the appreciation of this drawing. This is because we must find creative ways to translate artistic language into healing and development.

Conclusion

Human beings have been endowed with everything to make life comfortable. The deep sense of self-discovery, self-initiative, self-exploration through the creative connections in the expressive arts is of course a great way of overcoming our inhibitions and forging ahead. Integrating the arts and therapy help us rediscover ourselves. This is because the arts overlap and collaborate naturally. The Expressive arts therapy which embraces therapy through dance, music, sound, writing art, poetry, meditation and improvisational drama etc., can aid healing, resolving inner conflicts and reawakening of our creative instincts and uniqueness. These healing processes are achieved even better when the various arts merge to heal and solve the numerous problems of life. There is still room for further studies in this area although research funding is minimal or non-existent; we are doing our best to uncover as much as we can.



Name: Finding Possibilities in Impossibilities

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