

Potentials of Drama Therapy for Healing Childhood Trauma in Delinquents in Ibadan

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Abstract

Drama therapy is the deliberate deployment of healing aspects of drama to address mental, emotional, and psychological issues bedevilling humans. Studies have confirmed the potency of drama therapy in addressing different health problems such as schizophrenia, dementia, learning disorder, trauma, domestic violence, and even eating disorders, especially in the US, the UK, Canada, Australia, South Africa, etcetera. However, there is limited or no research on leveraging the potency of drama therapy for childhood trauma in juvenile offenders in Nigeria. Therefore, this study is hinged on the propensity of drama therapy with juvenile offenders in Ibadan to alleviate the mental effects of childhood trauma in the correctional facility. The study dwelled on David Read Johnson's developmental transformation, while adopting the qualitative approach with instruments such as interview, focus group discussion and participant observation to collect relevant data. Findings reveal that developmental transformation methods are capable of propelling traumatic juvenile offenders towards adapting with situations and suggesting ways to achieve their goals. It is concluded that drama therapy helped delinquents in Ibadan to

release emotions and develop the courage and audacity to confront their problems, and suggest way-forwards without fear. Hence, the study recommends that theatre scholars in Nigeria and Africa should consider instituting the practice and research of drama therapy to expose its potency as a multidisciplinary field while also extending its impacts to the community.

Keywords: Drama therapy, childhood trauma, juveniles, mental health, healing, developmental transformation

Introduction

Drama therapy has been identified as a potent tool to help those in mental, emotional and psychological needs heal, dwelling on the techniques of drama and theatre. Albeit a discipline mostly associated to theatre practitioners, drama therapy registers its trans-disciplinary and interdisciplinary idiosyncratic evolutionary trend banking on theatre, psychodrama, psychotherapy, psychology, sociology, and other health-related fields. The use of drama therapy is deliberate, such that, in the therapeutic process, emphasis is placed on particular aspects of theatre and drama which could facilitate healing. This method of healing is also action-packed because it adopts techniques that spur imagination, creativity, insight, learning and development (BADth, 2020).

In other words, drama therapy is capable of inciting people to learn from their personal experiences in the process of playing, and acting out scenarios that will not only spur catharsis but ensure they learn and become better versions of themselves. The uniqueness of drama therapy is essentially traced to its drama or

theatre process-based method of helping individuals bedevilled with varying psychosocial or mental issues to understand themselves more, and commit to alleviating the issues affecting them. Drama therapy has been adopted in different contexts to help people in need of therapy heal from psychosocial problems, including schools, psychiatric hospitals, general hospitals, correctional homes, and prisons, which shows its potentials among juvenile offenders in Nigeria.

Juvenile correctional facilities in Nigeria are installed, as echoed in the Children and Young Person Law (1958), to cater for the wellbeing of the young folk in Nigeria, and at the same time correct and treat juvenile delinquents in the country. Some of these minors are christened juvenile offenders when they are found guilty of committing certain acts equivalent to a crime if they were not underage. There are beyond-parental-control minors whose parents have reported not to have the capacity to control them and make them of good behavioural conducts. Also, there are others who are in desperate need of care and protection such as beggars and wanderers (Sa'ad, 2008). Juveniles in the correctional facility in Ibadan are reported to have records of substance abuse, stealing, immoral and criminal acts. These acts are associated to childhood trauma which could have made the minors suffer from myriads of emotional disturbances that influence their improper acts and behavioural abnormalities.

Childhood trauma is a global public health issue which continues to affect the wellbeing and personality of people, today, owing to their childhood adversity experiences. While terming childhood trauma as child maltreatment, the World Health Organisation (2020) sees it as any form of physical or emotional mistreatment, negligence, sexual abuse, neglect, exposure to violent

situations, and/or any commercial or other exploitation performed to an under-aged child or teenager that irrevocably leads to possible or actual harm to the health, life, development or dignity of a child or adolescent. This is a pointer to the fact that homes and caregiving institutions where toxic relationships with children prevail are liable to being causative agents of childhood trauma. A significant number of children and adolescents suffer from behavioural, social, mental and emotional health problems (Voz et al., 2020; Kieling et al.; 2011 & Belfer, 2008).

In the context of juvenile correctional facility in Nigeria, Bella, Atilola and Omigbodun (2010:1) expose, in their study of the psychopathological and psychosocial needs of children within the juvenile justice system in Nigeria, that, tremendous mental health issues were found among children incarcerated in Nigeria prisons, which must not be allowed to fester. The scholars maintain that such intervention needs collaborative contributions from professionals in mental health with the support of child care stakeholders. Extrapolating from this, it is apposite to state that drama therapy could be deployed to explore the mental health needs of juvenile offenders, as it is bent on addressing a series of public health issues, wherein it performs psychotherapeutic function of healing patients with mental health problem and the likes.

Albeit there has been very limited research works bordered on childhood trauma in Nigeria, no research has been documented on the potentials of drama therapy to alleviate the mental effects of childhood trauma among juveniles in a correctional facility. This is the focal point of the research as it seeks to fill the age-long gap of drama therapy in the academic landscape of the country. Drama therapists facilitate a safe space where individuals and groups could bare their minds for constructive exploration of their issues, and for

healing to take place. Apparently, children appreciate safe (or sacred) place designated for them to play and traverse their imaginations. Cattanach (2005) notes that the space is both physical and psychic as the child and the therapist meet there and work together to let their relationship grow. This is feasible because children are fond of playing in spaces distanced from their real world. Drawing on this backdrop, this study is geared towards examining the possibility of using drama therapy to alleviate childhood trauma among juveniles in a correctional facility in Nigeria.

Childhood Trauma and its Effects on Child Wellbeing

Studies have established the tendency for childhood trauma leading to self-harm or violence as they grow into different stages of their lives (Webb et al., 2017 and Rebecca, 2019). Thus, the stages of development in life is bedecked with different experiences and demands that tend to warrant some mental capacity to cope and adjust to situations, however childhood trauma may deprive an individual of such mental capacity. It has also been discovered that childhood trauma is inextricably linked to psychotic symptoms, anxiety, higher rate of depression, stress, mental health issues, substance abuse and other risky behaviours (Duhig, 2015), and it is hypothesised that these factors could induce individuals towards violent acts as they grow and progress in life (Rebecca, 2019). This is understandable since traumatic events tend to recur for long if the victim does not heal from the condition, and as such they might consider violence as better option to express their feelings. Kisely et al. (2020) also proclaim that victims of childhood adversities heightens the possibility of experiencing anxiety, depression and some abnormal behaviours subsequently as they age.

Therefore, there is every tendency that this issue may continue if childhood trauma recurs across the world; and more acutely if proactive measures are not put in place to address it. While the harmful effects of childhood trauma may be felt at the early stage, the effects tend to fester at the later stage of human development because of its biological implication, as stated in the foregoing, which specifies abnormalities in the brain. Similarly, McCrory et al. (2020) corroborates that, traumatic events at early stage in life could alter how the human brain functions since it unpacks a legion of hormonal, neurochemical, and physiological modifications. When there is an alteration in the human brain, a plethora of issues are liable to unfold, affecting how one thinks about oneself and others.

Case History of the Selected Juvenile: Abdulmalik

The drama therapy intervention was realised with three consecutive sessions with the beyond parental control minors in the correctional facility. As established in previous chapters of this work, these minors have records of parental misguidance, violence and mistreatments. Before the commencement of the first session, the researcher engaged in a focus group discussion with the minors where each participant revealed their social background and childhood experiences, especially the issues that culminated in their incarceration. Also, the researcher interacted with the minors and a juvenile who has acute case history was selected while the minors agreed to contribute in one way or another to the processes of the sessions.

Abdulmalik was an infant when his parents abandoned him with his aunt who has been taking care of him in her husband's house. His aunt's husband accepts him because there was no

alternative. However, Abdulmalik was enrolled in a local Islamic school where he learned Arabic and Islamic teachings, while his cousins were enrolled in a private western school. Abdulmalik was never happy with the decision to enrol him in a Madrasah instead of a western school because that is what he deems beneficial to him. With this, Abdulmalik concluded that his aunt's husband hated him and did not treat him like his biological son. Meanwhile, anytime he asked about his parents, he was forced to forget about them because no one knows their whereabouts. He decided to abscond from the house, trekking from his state to Iwo Road, Ibadan where he was picked by security agents and taken to the correctional facility in Ijokodo. Ever since then, Abdulmalik has continued to think about his parent's whereabouts and why they had to abandon him to suffer in the hands of his aunt's husband. This has left him traumatised and depressed for a few years. Although he is enrolled in a private secondary school in Ibadan, his childhood experiences continue to haunt him and never wants to reunite with his cousins, aunt, nor her husband. He prefers to stay at the correctional facility till he discovers his parents' whereabouts in order to meet them and enjoy parental care.

The researcher opened the session with a short 'rap' attributed to Developmental Transformations (DvT) which, according to Johnson (2005), is a short presentation which establishes the goal of the session in relation the client's issue and possible challenges. The rap also allows the therapist to request the client's cooperation throughout the session.

Therapist: I appreciate you all for your readiness to be part of this drama therapy intervention. As you all have agreed, we are working on one person's issue this time, and some of you have reported to be radical

and disobedient, while some of you lack empathy. In the next few minutes, Abdulmalik will step out to the centre here with me, so we act out the issues and situations relevant to his childhood experience. During these moments, it is possible you lose interest or run out of ideas, but it is fine as we shall work this out together as a group and consider different options. Our engagement today will help you to learn how to appreciate others and handle decision-making. Meanwhile, what is more important is that during this session, ensure you have fun and enjoy yourself throughout the whole process.

The rap was an entrance mode that helped the juveniles understand the reason for being part of the group and the objectives set. The researchers, afterwards, coordinated an emotional exercise called behind-the-back to create and strengthen bonding within the group. In this exercise, each of the juveniles was asked to remove themselves from the group while also turning their back on others. Other group members were asked to talk about the individual as if they were physically absent. They all found this exercise fun-filled because unexpected traits were mentioned about some individuals who were also amazed to have been attributed to such quality. While doing the exercise with Abdulmalik, most of the group members paid more attention to its good traits, especially the way he looks after them, and also exposes them to some Islamic teachings which they lacked before getting to the correctional facility. This gladdened the boy who blushed on several occasions before the end of the exercise. With this, it became apparent that the boy genuinely appreciates kindness, unadulterated care, love and compassion.

It is noteworthy that, during the intervention, the researchers adopted Developmental Transformations, which is an embodied approach that accentuates free-flowing improvisation between the researcher and client in a play-space. This approach was appropriate, considering the minors' evident capability to relate quickly with events and adapt to them. The minors have also shown, during the checking-in stage, team work and empathy traits which rendered the technique befitting for the context.

Researcher: (The researcher takes the centre stage and improvised a short monologue presentation to demonstrate to the juveniles how to improvise scenarios, illustrating discrepant and enhanced communications in a free play.) Everybody stand up and form a very big circle.

All: (The juveniles formed a big circle without holding hands, anxious to experience the play that was about to happen).

Researcher: Good! So, this circle separates fantasy from reality. Within this circle we can become anything and anyone at a point in time. Is that all right?

All: Okay... (Some of them kept murmuring words, while two of them rushed to the door, locked it to prevent anyone from entering into their playspace.)

Researcher: Wow! This is perfect! We have created our playspace. Here, we are in the land of fantasy! Once we step out of here, we go back to reality. Is that all right?

All: Yes!!!

Researcher: So, you can all sit. (They sit and focused on the centre). Abdulmalik, stand up and come so we

engage in a free play. (The boy stood up and moved to the centre of the circle. the researcher avoided him, but he just smiled and kept looking at him.)

Abdulmalik: I thought you asked me to come out.

Researcher: Yes, I did.

Abdulmalik: So, have we started already?

Researcher: Yes, of course.

Abdulmalik: Really, but I was not aware. What if I was not ready? You just started like that.

Researcher: What do you think I should have done?

Abdulmalik: Ah... I thought you would tell me to start, like you tell me to prepare and start.

Researcher: Don't you think you are disrespecting me that way?

Abdulmalik: How?

Researcher: By thinking I am not doing the right thing.

Abdulmalik: No, I did not say so.

Researcher: But you just did so now.

Abdulmalik: No... I only asked you to let me know when we are starting this. (Turns to the group members) Or was that not what I said? (Some group member nodded, while some said they did not know)

Researcher: Well, you don't have to start now.

Abdulmalik: Why?

Researcher: Nothing. You will not understand. Let us try it with another person first.

Abdulmalik: But I'm here already, and I want to do it.

Researcher: But you are being rude. You're showing to me that you know it all.

Abdulmalik: Oh, did I?

Researcher: Yes.

- Abdulmalik: I won't do that again.
- Researcher: You have to say sorry then.
- Abdulmalik: (sighs) okay... I'm sorry (smiles)
- Researcher: No problem. (the researcher saw a pen on the floor and made to pick it, then stopped) This pen is yours?
- Abdulmalik: No.
- Researcher: Why? Don't you use a pen?
- Abdulmalik: No, I don't use it.
- Researcher: But why?
- Abdulmalik: Nothing.
- Researcher: But some people use it to write even in Arabic.
- Abdulmalik: Yes. But it is common in schools.
- Researcher: You are right but you can also use it in the Arabic school.
- Abdulmalik: See, I don't like what you are saying.
- Researcher: But I am saying you can also use it at the Madrasah.
- Abdulmalik: Yes! I don't think I want to use it there.
- Researcher: Why do you think so?
- Abdulmalik: (He sat on the floor and looked on as if to cry. The researcher kept himself distanced from him) I see my mates go to school every day, and I don't want to be a slave to them in the future. (He sobbed and cleared his tears. The researcher moved to him and sat in his front facing him.)
- Researcher: I just encouraged you to use the pen at your Madrasah. Is it bad?
- Abdulmalik: Yes. You don't want me to go to school.
- Researcher: What if there is no money to take you to school?
- Abdulmalik: What about others?

Researcher: (Speechless for a while, but placed his hand on Abdulmalik's shoulder)

Researcher: What do you think we can do about this?

Abdulmalik: I don't know. I just want to go to school too.

Researcher: But where is the money.

Abdulmalik: (Silence for about a minute.) So, I will be a slave in the future?

Researcher: No.

Abdulmalik: I'm going. (He stood up to leave the circle but the researcher held his hand)

Researcher: (Playfully and facing the rest of the group) Abdulmalik seems not to accept the fact that his aunt's husband may not have the financial means to cater for his needs in school, but still wants him to acquire Arabic and Islamic knowledge. He seems to have a different view about this issue.

Abdulmalik: I just want to have a sponsor.

Researcher: Oh. Repeat that.

Abdulmalik: I just want to have a sponsor.

Researcher: Louder!

Abdulmalik: I just want to have a sponsor.

Researcher: Now, whisper it.

Abdulmalik: I just want to have a sponsor.

Researcher: But your parents? Don't you want to meet them again?

Abdulmalik: I think I am accepting my fate now. If they come for me, fine.

Researcher: That's great! We have to stop here now. Well done.

Abdulmalik: Thank you. (He held the researcher's hand for a while. The researcher hugged Abdulmalik for a while and then released him.).

Researcher: Now, let us close the fantasy world. Everybody, stand up and open a space for me to step out. (The group gave way as the researcher jumped out of the circle.) So, everybody, turn your back to the circle and face me. Now, move to this place (they moved close to him) Great! We are back to reality!

All: Yes!!

After the improvised acting, Abdulmalik became emotional as he kept quiet for a while, and the group also felt the emotions in their mate but only bantered with it. While still maintaining the circle, the researcher did a focus group discussion with the juveniles and urged them to express their feelings about the improvised performance. One member said he really wanted Abdulmalik to meet his parents one day, and that he would follow him so he could tell them not to abandon him again, because he knows the boy is very intelligent but always saddened whenever he longed to meet his parents. Another discussant said if he were Abdulmalik, he would not run from home but would confront his aunt to know why her husband does not want to enrol him in a school but a local Islamic school. Amidst the whole review of the session, Abdulmalik could not utter a word which portended remorse or a fibre of self-reflection. When he finally spoke during the focus group, he said, "I am longer angry with my aunt's husband but I will like to have a sponsor who could cater for my school fees".

Meanwhile, the researcher conducted an in-depth interview with Abdulmalik to uncover some other issues that probably still

bothered him in regard to his unseen parents and his aunt's husband. He explained thus:

I can still remember when I wanted to run away from home, my aunt's husband returned home from a short travel and bought some goodies for me and his kids. He gave me half of what was given to his kids. This made me conclude that he did not like in any way, coupled with the fact that he only enrolled me in a local Islamic school in the neighbourhood. I just left without letting anyone know my whereabouts. I am having a fresh feeling about the whole situation, and I think maybe I can visit them one day and meet their children whom I experienced my childhood with and leave them. I don't think I can leave with them like before, anyway.

Afterwards, some of the group members asked when another session will be done again. This revealed to the researcher that the juveniles have developed unbridled interest in the drama therapy intervention, which seemed to facilitate the burden of coordinating them for another session. The potency of drama and theatre which is deployed in drama therapy is ultimately the ability to bear minds and communicate human conditions in varied dimensions. In the course of the drama therapy intervention, walking through given circumstances of a client's childhood experience, it was obvious that both the clients and the researcher were availed a better understanding of humanity.

Discussion

This researcher adopted Developmental Transformations to incorporate himself completely in the improvised and embodied acting that ensued in the DT intervention. This helped to provide an easy and simple premise for the client to get into role and develop

better understanding of what they were doing, bearing in mind the spaces established for both fantasy and reality. While the client queried the researcher when to begin the action, the therapist used this to compel him to adapt to the way they unfolded the performance. In other words, the researcher tried to engender on the client the need to accept anything that comes his way and move on with it. This set the premise for what the researcher expected from the client, Abdulmalik, during the second session, albeit the researcher's initial rap that explained the objective, challenges, and the goal of the session to all the group members.

The researcher led the free play and ensured the increase of the physical, emotional and interpersonal necessity on the client. As they progress in the play, images began to develop which helped incite the client's creative effort. While leading the play, the researcher encouraged the boy to contribute and take risks that could influence how the action unfolded.

Johnson (2005) notes that the leader is expected to adopt different interventions to enhance the action and to give feedbacks to the client(s), and there are about four tools which are germane to the discussion, namely, joining, intensifications, transformation to the here and now, and diverging. To join the improvised action, the researchers ensured they evoke the client's imagination and concentration, making him understand and adapt to the fantasy realm. This support was needed to ensure the client stay on course and navigate through the cognitive and emotional journey.

Intensification usually happens in instances where the leader calls the client's attention to variations and reinforces their atonement and awareness by making an action softer or louder. This allows the client to focus and feel the interpersonal and emotional reality of the situation (Butler, 2012). Intensification was apparently

employed during the action, as shown in the foregoing, where the leader urged the client to repeat the question loudly:

Abdulmalik: I just want to have a sponsor.

Researcher: Oh. Repeat that.

Abdulmalik: I just want to have a sponsor.

Researcher: Louder!

Abdulmalik: I just want to have a sponsor.

Researcher: Now, whisper it.

Abdulmalik: I just want to have a sponsor.

Being able to play with the intensity of the expression, the client was able to explore the varying affective implications of the clause. The intensification helped the client to develop strong alternative towards the issue being explored. Also, transformation to the here and now is established when the leader (this researcher) gives a running commentary on the action. This allows the leader to comment on the real action playfully. The leader is expected to moderate the engagements through his immediate exposition of client's misalignment and connectivity. This allows the leader to challenge the client on their deceitful conviction over the issue being explored. For instance, when the leader noticed Abdulmalik was countering the idea that his aunt's husband might not have enough finance to sponsor him in school, he provided immediate feedback to that effect.

Researcher: *(Playfully and facing the rest of the group)*

Abdulmalik seems not to accept the fact that his aunt's husband may not have the financial means to cater for his needs in school, but still wants him to acquire Arabic and Islamic knowledge. He seems to have a different view about this issue.

The implication of this transformation to the here and now is that the client was propelled to activate his thought processes by unearthing a mechanism to facilitate his adaptation amidst the mental problems relating to his childhood mistreatment. He established that he could be comfortable having a sponsor for his education. This revealed that the technique was able to prompt the client towards the point of adapting with his situation and also progress to suggesting possible ways to achieve his goal.

Diverging is the key to unlocking the client's flexibility, as new ways of relating are suggested by the leader through discrepant actions and images. Heightening the instability of the situation could make the client inculcate adaptability and sustain the moments in the playspace. The leader needs to discover when there are repetitive actions and stir up different things (Butler, 2012).

Abdulmalik: (*sighs*) okay... I'm sorry (*smiles*)

Researcher: No problem. (*The researcher saw a pen on the floor and made to pick it, then stopped*) This pen is yours?

Abdulmalik was bound to react to this novel information while he adjusted to the change in the repetitive pattern of behaviour. In other words, the leader diverged from the regular behaviour the client had put up to provoke new actions from him and develop the ability to adapt to new situations as quickly as possible. Dwelling on the tools adopted, the client evidently worked on his problem and was motivated to make new choices within the play space, which are expected to influence his actions in the real world. These tools within the DvT framework enabled the researcher to avail the client embodied experiences in the course of making new decisions for himself, in his encounter with the researcher and the entire group. Essentially, after garnering the new choices within the

established play space, the client is expected to transfer them into real world. As the play came to an end, the researcher established this by leading the clients to dismantle the circle in order to return to their real world where they can apply what the choices they have made in the fantasy world.

Conclusion

The study is premised on the hypothesis that drama therapy has the capacity to address mental health problem, regardless of the context, bearing in mind that childhood trauma is capable of sustaining mental disorder in a victim throughout their lifetime. Having underscored the recurrence of childhood trauma in juvenile offenders in correctional facility in Ibadan, the study has undergone a practice-based research to test the possibility of deploying drama therapy to alleviate childhood trauma in juvenile offenders in a correctional facility. Deploying developmental transformations, with tools such as joining, intensification, transformation in the here and now, and diverging, it is apparent that juveniles with childhood trauma could be healed with drama therapy. The study maintains that giving delinquents the chance to reconnect to their traumatic experiences in childhood in a safe space and especially through improvised plays helps to reduce their pain and remorse. Juveniles can leverage on drama therapy intervention to release and evoke emotions, as this practice-based study galvanised the targeted juvenile to accept his situation and keep moving with the pressures of life. This apparently will not change the juveniles overnight but inspire them to develop the courage and audacity to confront their problems and suggest way-forwards within the sessions.

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