

**DRAMA THERAPY
FOR COUNSELLING
IN A
PRIMARY SCHOOL**

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Abstract

This study of Drama Therapy was carried out to explore on the effectiveness of Drama therapy approaches or interventions for a primary school. Drama Therapy approaches was applied for children who receive counseling and in general for the whole section of grade 5 in a Private Boys' school in Colombo. Emotional well being in the Primary school years of a child is very crucial for the child's overall development mental, physical, social and emotional and for the development of personality. Therefore the school plays an important role in establishing and maintaining the well being of the child. However presently the numbers are increasing of the children who suffer from mental health issues and the children with special needs too are increasing. This increase also can be felt due to the development of screening procedures for special needs in the country. Therefore this study will investigate on the effectiveness of Drama therapy in a primary school.

Introduction

Today, more than ever early childhood primary school years are given much importance as Positive emotional health is fundamental to all our lives. It underpins everything that we do, how we think, feel, act and behave. It impacts on education. Investing in children's emotional wellbeing and mental health is as vital as attending to their physical health as it gives positive outcomes in childhood and successes in future adulthood.

Children with higher levels of emotional, behavioural, social and school wellbeing, on average, have higher levels of academic achievement and are more engaged in school. Children with better emotional wellbeing make more progress in primary school and are more engaged in later school years.

Schools play a vital role in the promotion of positive mental health in children. Schools can also provide a safe and supportive environment for building life skills. Listening to the voice of the child and fostering healthy relationships with peers, teachers are essential to children's positive experience of school and their cognitive and emotional development.

However the present children population in Sri Lanka undergoes lot of stress and mental health problems. Presently most schools seem to be failing in promoting and maintaining mental well being of the children. Children undergo stress due to high competition in education, parental problems, school problems, and peer issues and so on. Therefore the number of children attending for Psychiatric units and professionals are rapidly increasing. The children born with special needs who need long term special care too is increasing.

Therefore a need is built for promoting special care and services for the children who need counseling and special needs education in the country. More and more professionals are on demand

catering their needs. Counselling is placed in most schools in Sri Lanka. Counselling primary children is challenging as “Talk therapy or Cognitive behavioral therapy would not work alone on the child. You need broad range of therapies to apply on primary children. Drama therapy, art and music therapy will work quite effectively on small children.

Drama therapy is a type of psychotherapy using the art forms of drama and theater. It is one of the creative art therapies which include art, music, drama, dance and movement. It can be offered individually and in groups. These sessions allow or give opportunity to express emotions using different methods with play, storytelling and movement and can be verbal and non verbal.

(Dramatherapist.net, 2018)

Drama therapy helps in counseling for the children who find difficult to express themselves verbally so that they can use methods of art, music, puppets and movement to express their issues. Drama therapy also helps a person to start discovering him or herself. The school children go through following issues:

- Attachment issues
- Phobias and anxiety
- Family issues
- Communication difficulties
- Learning difficulties
- Challenging behaviours
- Sexual abuse
- Death of a parent/ divorce
- Peer problems/ bullying

In counseling it is vital to have different effective methods to deal with above issues of children.

Review of Literature

There is literature on a research Study done by Wen Lung Chang of the Wen-Lung Chang, Assistant Professor Department of Drama Creation and Application National University of Tainan and Wei-Ming Liu, Teacher on Application of the Drama Therapy on ADHD Students' Social Abilities at the Resource Class of the Elementary School. The purpose of the study is to apply Drama Therapy Skills in the resource-room classes for ADHD (Attention Deficit hyperactivity Disorder) students.

There are five conclusions in the study. Firstly, the Drama Therapy Skills had produced a positive result for the curriculum of the resource-room class; therefore, Drama Therapy is worthy of being promoted in the educational field in Taiwan. Secondly, the application of the Drama Therapy Skills on the group lessons had indeed enhanced the social abilities of the ADHD students in the resource-room class to some extent. Thirdly, the purpose, process and effect of the Drama Therapy Skills had derived recognition from parents and teachers. Fourthly, ADHD students will have different reactions to different Drama Therapy Skills and different circumstances. Fifthly, the applications of the Drama Therapy are diverse.

Retrieved from:http://ed.arted.gov.tw/uploadfile/Periodical/1518_arts_education42_00360064.pdf

Another Literature is found on a case study called "Playing with Gladys" where drama therapy with behavioural interventions was applied for the treatment of selective mutism. This was carried by Phei Phei Oon (March, 2010)

This case study examines an integrative approach combining drama therapy and the behavioural skill “shaping”, as offered to Gladys, a 5-year-old girl diagnosed with selective mutism. This article looks at how the three elements of drama therapy — the play space, role-playing and dramatic projection — brought about therapeutic changes for Gladys.
<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/135910450935289>

Discussion

Drama Therapy strategies were applied for individually and for small groups in the boys’ school primary section. A student with severe anxiety was referred for counseling care and drama therapy techniques were applied along with talk therapy. This particular student is 10 years old and refused to go to his class, where he was anxious when the sectional head shouts or scold other children in his class. He developed a severe phobia towards this teacher, and the boy preferred to stay and felt secure only in the counseling unit. Cognitive behavioral therapy was not easy to apply as anxiety was high.

First two sessions were carried out for rapport building with the client. And music therapy was applied with relaxation and deep breathing for this boy. And he revealed to whom he was scared. Role play was applied where he expressed his thought and emotions on this particular teacher. Mask similar to the expressions of the teacher was made and put on the empty chair where the client sat on the next chair and he spoke on the emotions he stored regarding the fearful behavior and strict disciplinary manner of the teacher. He expressed how hurt he felt and fear when he witnessed other boys getting hit by her and scolded severely. Music therapy relaxation sessions were done every day as a starter for the day, and then only role play, masks or any other

intervention was taken place. It took several sessions for the fear, anxiety to decrease of this boy regarding the teacher and gradually to move to his class.

Improvisation, movement therapy was applied for the boys with symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity disorder. ADHD kids finds extremely difficult to control their movements; therefore they cannot focus on learning. According Psychology Today article (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-athletes-way/201506/increasing-physical-movement-reduces-symptoms-adhd>) Researchers from the UC Davis MIND Institute at the University of California have identified that physical movement may improve cognitive control and the ability to focus attention for children with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. The researchers were able to correlate the intensity and frequency of movement with higher scores on cognitively demanding tasks requiring focused attention. Study participants with ADHD exhibited substantially better cognitive performance the more they moved their bodies.

The boys who are “labeled” as “ADHD” in the school are mostly on screens, laptop, tab or mobile. Therefore movement therapy worked well with these groups. They loved to move their bodies for the music played, and the music was chosen carefully to calm them down. They became very relaxed and enjoyed the discipline they gained over their bodies. However this activity must be carried out daily every morning before they start their lessons in school.

There are currently two boys diagnosed as Autistic in Kindergarten. These boys showed significant improvement in eye contact when drama therapy sessions were carried out such as storytelling and puppetry. Their listening abilities were developed along with eye contact. Puppets helped with motor coordination of the children and they struggled but managed holding them and communication was almost non verbal with smiles and eye contact.

A pilot study was documented in a newspaper called Daily news in 2014, April and was mentioned in the website “New scientist” (<https://www.newscientist.com/article/dn25419-drama-helps-kids-with-autism-communicate-better/>) this research was called “Imagining Autism”, where a group of children entered an enclosed themed environment such as a forest. Trained performers used improvisation techniques to encourage children engage creatively. The aim was that the sessions will improve children’s communication, social interaction and imagination skills which is seen in Autism. Children were assessed before and after intervention researchers also assessed emotional recognition. At the early assessments, all children showed some improvement. The most important change was in the number of facial expressions known a key communication skill. Nine children improved on this. Six children improved on their level of social interaction. The main changes were also seen at the follow-up assessments.

Even with the two kindergarten autistic children in the school, improvement in their facial expressions were evident. They developed eye contact, maintained eye contact with the counselor, facial expressions to show happiness was there. In one session puppets were taken as peers in the class. Then playing and holding puppets were different.

A grade four student was referred for counseling being isolated in class, lack of speech, draw back in studies and anger problems. Talk therapy was used in the first session to build the rapport with the client; he was an only child in the family and didn’t know how to build friendships outside home. He sort of had a social phobia and the class mates had bullied him verbally as he always stayed alone in class. Drama therapy technique called mirroring was first tried with the client, then improvisation for sounds of a jungle. He moved freely making sounds throughout the space of the counseling unit. Then in another session the sand tray was tried with objects, figures and sand.

CATHY A. MALCHIODI (2005) explained in his book called “Expressive Therapies” that Sand play therapy is a creative form of psychotherapy that uses a sandbox and a large collection of miniatures to enable a client to explore the deeper layers of the psyche in a totally new format. By constructing a series of “sand pictures,” a client is helped to illustrate and integrate his or her psychological condition. To a surprise he responded well for this technique as he buried some figures under sand and placed some in the corner. He spoke out revealing on how he witnessed domestic violence in his home, where father beating the mother, father was an alcohol addict. He developed a phobia. The buried ones under sand were the father and the children who bully him in class. Several sessions were carried out using improvisation, talk therapy, CBT, empty chair and masks to sort of help the client get over the phobias and bullying effects. A program was designed and conducted for grade five boys on Drama therapy, fifteen boys in a group was taken separately. Below mentioned is the program conducted:

Target Group: 10 years old in smaller groups

Duration: 1.5 hours

Activities:

- I. Warm up exercise: Train:
Targets: Team work/ building up attention/follow instructions
- II. Deep breathing while seated to relaxing music

Target: Calm down/ quiet time
- III. Jungle:
Target: Respecting peers by not hurting other animals in the jungle which are freely moving to jungle sounds
- IV. Deep breathing to relaxing music:
Target: calming down
- V. Mirroring:
Targets: Building up attention/eye contact/self discipline/slow movements to music
- VI. Art Therapy: Free drawing with background relaxing music
- VII. Deep Breathing : relaxation
- VIII. Feed back/ Termination

Music was chosen very carefully that suit the children, building up self discipline and attention was the main focus, the children were quite amazed with the program and all most all of them cooperated quite well. Some Feedback forms are attached on to this paper for reference.

Conclusion

Drama/ Music/Art/Movement Therapies are also expressive therapies. Talk is a traditional method used in therapy and counseling. However people also have varied styles of expressing themselves. One person or child may be more tactile than visual. The therapist must be able to capture the expressive style of the client to have the best communication in a session.

Drama therapy in a way helps the client to distant the issue or the bad memories from him or herself which is also a form of healing. Drama Therapy is an active approach that allows the child to reveal inner trauma or bad memories, improve interpersonal skills and so on through role play, stories, improvisation, puppets, mirroring, masks, sand tray games and so on.

All these therapies allow the “child” to “play” which is an important requirement of child’s life. According to Erikson and other theorists, play allows children to gain mastery over conflicts and anxieties. According to North American Drama Therapy Association Often children don’t communicate their feelings and thoughts through only words. They have another language – that of play. Children use toys, objects, and stories to attempt to understand the world around them, and to communicate their needs. (<http://www.nadta.org/assets/documents/children-adolescent-fact-sheet.pdf>)

There are lots of benefits achieved by a child through drama therapy:

- Improve concentration and attention span
- Team work
- Improvement of eye contact
- Develop new skills
- Improving self esteem and self worth
- Develop interpersonal skills
- Reduces anxiety/ phobia or stress levels
- Relaxation
- Opportunity to express your own story
- Emotional and physical integration
- Develop new coping skills
- Communicate needs and wants
- Learn to trust
- Improve communication and language
- Address problems in indirect ways
- Distant the problem and find new problem solving ways
- Development of creativity
- Body/mind voice awareness

However Drama therapy techniques must be chosen carefully for each child matching with age and the need. However even though lot of benefits can be achieved through drama therapy, present Sri Lankan education system has made schools, teachers, parents and the children to go on a rat race which created stress and other forms of mental health issues.

However the awareness and acceptance of receiving counseling and other forms psychotherapies is very poor in Sri Lanka. Therefore people failed to continue therapy sessions due to ignorance and financial difficulties, which reduces the effectiveness of treatment and therapy on psychological conditions. Careful selection of therapies is very important in dealing with school children under counseling or special needs. However it is indeed very active, interesting and effective to use Expressive therapies such as Drama, music, art and so on with primary children. Drama Therapy is indeed a two way fulfilling healthy counseling approach for both counselor/therapist and the little child with lots of benefits for an overall well being.

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