



### ***ETHNODRAMATHERAPY TO EMPOWER STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN SRI LANKA***

**Ravindra Ranasinha PhD**

*Research Centre for Dramatherapy, Colombo, Sri Lanka.*

*Mobile No. +9471 983 9507*

*Email: ravindraranasinha@gmail.com*

#### **Key words:**

*ethnodramatherapy  
special educational needs  
empowerment  
dramatherapy  
creativity*

#### **ABSTRACT**

An ethnodramatherapy study was implemented at the school for special educational needs conducted by the Sri Lanka Army. This institution, namely, Senehasa Education Resource Research and Information Center (SERRIC) in Colombo, provided facilities for the study from March to October 2018. This study aimed at investigating how 100 students with SEN grow emotionally, behaviourally, and socially, on being able to voice their hopes, wishes, emotions, and abilities. Qualitative data was collected through observation, informal conversations, discussions, and narratives. The students with SEN were treated as a single case. Three key themes emerged in the final analysis of data. The analyzed data revealed that the ethnodramatherapy performance made the students with SEN to feel fulfilled, to manage their emotions and behavior, and to develop a sense of belongingness. Ethnodramatherapy is a catalytic agent that empowers the students with SEN, to develop a positive self-image.

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Ethnodramatherapy is a novel concept to Sri Lanka. In 2018, an ethnodramatherapy study was conducted at the Sri Lanka Army special needs school, *Senehasa* Education Resource Research and Information Center (SERRIC). One hundred students with special educational needs (SEN) ( $n=100$ ) participated in this ethnodramatherapy study.

The concept of ethnodramatherapy emerged in the West, and its efficacy has been tested with diverse client populations (Antonelli et al., 2014; Saldana, 2005; Snow et al., 2003; Mienczakowski, 2001). Two studies have found that ethnodramatherapy allows the population with SEN to voice for them, and can cause an attitudinal change in the society (Antonelli et al., 2014; Snow et al., 2003).

The students with SEN have a right to voice (Wickremesooriya, 2015:17) their hopes, wishes, emotions, and abilities, to grow emotionally, behaviourally, and socially. Kanu (2008) has identified twelve categories of special needs: (i) mental retardation, (ii) learning disabilities, (iii) emotional and behaviour disorder, (iv); communication disorders, (v) hearing loss, (vi) blindness and low vision, (vii) physical disabilities, (viii) autism, (ix) severe disabilities, (x) multiple disabilities, (xi) deaf/blindness, and (xii) gifted and talented. There is a view that “these children lack understanding of their needs” (Dissanayake et al., 2016), but “could be improved through a specialized education”, (Perera et al., 2014:1).

A positive development in Sri Lanka is that students with SEN receive opportunities to engage in dance, drama, and music programmes, to show their

talents. Such opportunities help them to develop their self-worth. (Sunday Observer, 2014; Daniel, 2011; Mohan, 2007). Some news reports refer to those performances as ‘therapeutic’ (Kodagoda, 2015). Positively, such performances enable the performer to view their *different abilities*.

A study on performance-ethnodramatherapy in Malta (Antonelli et al., 2014) shows its impact on the self-esteem of children with dyslexia. As the results show, the changed perception has empowered the children to perform better, academically. An ethnodramatherapy performance conducted by Stephen Snow at Bronx Psychiatric Centre in Canada, utilizing ‘self-narrative methods’, had allowed the patients to speak around their personal experiences with psychopharmacology. It had confronted the audience with their experience of what it is really like to be a mental health consumer (CAHD, 2012).

Mieczakowski researched on the use of ethnodrama to explore the lived experience of individuals with schizophrenia, and also that of persons with alcohol and drug problems. In both cases, ethnodramatic theatre productions were developed to help educate professionals in the health system and to catalyze positive changes in their treatment of clients (1995).

Mieczakowski’s definition of ethnodrama: ... ethnodrama is explicitly concerned with decoding and rendering accessible the culturally specific signs, symbols, aesthetics, behaviours, language and experience of health informants using accepted theatrical practices. It seeks to perform research findings in a language and code accessible to its wide audiences. (2001, p. 468) This quote underlines two of the most significant functions of the ethnodrama method as conceived by Mieczakowski: (1) the research report comes in the form of a performance; (2) the method is used as a form of health education for a specific population who is looked upon as a cultural system.

Johnny Saldana, a major expert and practitioner of ethnodrama in the United States, has used the method in other ways; for instance, to capture the experience of homeless youth living on the streets in New Orleans (2005). Besides its use as health education research, Saldana has anthologized many other applications of ethnodrama in research (2005, 2011).

Snow was a pioneer researcher in ethnodramatherapy. He stated that ethnodramatherapy demands the dramatherapist to play the role

of an ethnographer (personal meeting, 2015). Ethnography allows for understanding the meaning subjects give to their experiences (Chang, 2008) and how “motivated actions arise from and reflect back on these experiences” (Brewer, 2000, p. 11). This also allows readers to empathize, learn, and be sensitized to the specific cultural group (Ellis et al., 2011; Michelson, 2011; Tillmann, 2009), also giving space for minority groups to narrate the otherwise untold stories (Smith, 2005). Ellis (2009) describes ethnography as “unruly, dangerous, passionate, vulnerable, rebellious, creative-in motion, showing struggle, passion, embodied life, and collaborative creation of sense-making” (p. 360).

Snow researched extensively with adults with developmental and intellectual disabilities, especially adapting a model of therapeutic theatre for and with them (Snow et al., 2003). The fundamental focus of this research titled *In Their Own Voices* was de-stigmatization and the measure of “change of attitude” in the audiences. This was the seedbed for the development of the method to be called ethnodramatherapy.

Some salient features in Snow’s ethnodramatherapy model:

- Use of playback theatre as a means of gathering personal stories.
- In psychodramatic fashion, participants serve as auxiliary actors in the performance of each others’ stories.
- Participants are supported to develop genuine expressions of their feelings through acting, singing, dancing, and artwork.
- Masks are used as a distancing technique for the painful memories of being stigmatized.
- Feelings are projected into all forms of art in the play.
- Monologues of experiences important to the participants are presented.
- The growth of self-esteem and self-confidence is witnessed as participants perform their authentic experiences for different audiences.

The purpose of this study was to investigate how the ethnodramatherapy intervention empowers the students with SEN to grow emotionally, behaviorally, and socially.

## II. METHOD

The ethnodramatherapy intervention was a qualitative study.

### Participants

One hundred SEN students ( $n=100$ ) from SERRIC joined this study. These students experience a range of emotional, behavioural, intellectual, and developmental difficulties, and are within the age range of 6 to 25 years.

### Site

SERRIC auditorium was the venue for the ethnodramatherapy study. Training was conducted every Wednesday afternoon, from 1.00 to 4.00 p.m., commencing from March, 2018. When the performance date was nearing, intense rehearsals were conducted everyday during the last two weeks of September, from 9.00 a.m. to 4.00 p.m. The performance was held at Bishop's College Auditorium, Colombo 03, on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2018.

### Data Collection

Researcher observations, informal conversations (Tangen, 2008), auto-narratives, and reflections were used as the data collection tools, in this qualitative study. The data was collected from students with SEN, their parents, and teachers, whilst at rehearsals, and in post-performance sessions.

### Data Analysis

The analysis of data was carried out in accordance with the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), as presented by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009). IPA was chosen because it provided a detailed exploration of the students' lived experiences of performance-ethnodramatherapy. On compiling initial themes, they were then compared and consolidated into three key themes: happiness, self-management, and community.

### Ethical considerations

SERRIC obtained the caregiver consent for this study. The caregivers had the freedom to withdraw their child with SEN from the study at any moment they wish. The students, too, had the liberty to decide whether to stay with the study or not.

## III. FINDINGS

The findings are presented under the relevant themes that emerged in the final analysis.

### *a. Happiness*

The opportunity to share their story with an audience was a fulfilling experience for the students. They were happy to meet new friends, to perform on stage, and to showcase their talents. The students, who were able to verbalize, said: "It was nice", "Let's do another one".

The students, who could not verbalize, had other ways of expressing their happiness. They smiled, hugged others, squeezed the other's hands, and gave hi-fives.

During rehearsals, they requested for a repetition of the item or act, as it brought them joy. "Let's do that again," they said. "I want to do that action again," was the expression of a student, who loved traditional dancing. He signaled the dancing teacher to play the drum, so that he could dance.

One caregiver said: "My child wanted to play the drum. He wants to be a dancing teacher one day. He was very happy because he got the chance to show himself as a dancing teacher". Another caregiver said: "My daughter was happy, because she was able to act out her dream, as a bride." Many times this girl rehearsed how she would do shopping to buy her wedding dress, and then wore it behind a screen, to appear as a princess, making the audience to applaud and cheer.

"Joining a team like this made our children happy," told another parent whose son did not miss a single rehearsal day. "I am happy, because I meet a lot of friends here," said a child.

There were students who could not verbalize or show their emotions. The caregivers of those students mentioned that they were very calm and silent after the performance. A caregiver said: "My son has become very calm. He used to cry or fight for anything, and after this performance he has changed. I feel he is happy. That is why he looks very calm." Another caregiver said: "I have seen my daughter making loud noises or throwing things. Now I see her sitting on a cushion, with closed eyes. May be she is thinking about the performance, and feeling happy about herself."

## *b. Self-management*

Initially, during rehearsals the students used the auditorium, to play, and the teachers had their difficulty in managing that playfulness. "It's very difficult with them. They can't stay in one place," said a teacher. Loud talking and laughter echoed in the premises.

Gradually, with the progress of rehearsals, the students learnt to pay attention to the task. They avoided running and playing, as they used to be. When the teachers joined in action, it created a sense of security among the students, and built their confidence. "I was not scared," said a student who can verbalize. The students knew where to move on stage, take the right position, and make transition from one scene to another very smoothly.

The chaos that was visible at the beginning, faded at an amazing scale. The students were attentive, they listened carefully, maintained silence, waited for their time to act. "Shshsh...don't talk," was a student reaction to another, which was observed during rehearsals, and noted as an important development.

Teachers had a fear that the students will get distracted while performing, due to stage lights and sounds. "I was really scared that the children will run, or look somewhere else, when they see the lights," said a teacher during rehearsals. There was no such distraction while the performance was taking place. It confirms that the students have learnt to manage their emotions and behavior.

There was an instance where a student had a little time to change her costume, to appear for the next scene. The teacher tried her best to help the child. There was no time left, and the child appeared on stage, partly dressed. She was in full composure, and engaged in her performance. "I thought that she will refuse to act. She was in such a hurry. But she did well", said the teacher who tried to help the student.

After a few days from the performance, a caregiver mentioned that the child was seen "folding her clothes and arranging them in her cupboard." Another caregiver said: "She went home and started to make Thank You cards for the teachers. She wanted to appreciate the teachers."

## *c. Community*

The rehearsal time brought all the students together and created a large community. The students liked to

be in the community very much. They made friends, and had plenty of communication. There was a sense of comfort, when they were together. "I like to be with my friends," said a student. They were seen sharing their thoughts and emotions. They trusted everyone.

"I come here every day. I like to play with them," said a student. The community was a space for him to engage in play. The rehearsals created a space for their social engagement. Their interactions through hugs, squeezes, smiles, and remarks were valuable social interactions.

The students did not feel isolated, as they were accepted by others when they arrived at the rehearsal site. The sense of belongingness helped the students to develop their confidence. Even if they made a mistake, everyone was ready to help. The site was a supportive environment for the students to feel relaxed.

The community was increased with the integration of 30 students from a nearby school. These 'normal' children had difficulty in adjusting to this novel environment where smiles, sounds, and actions prevail without much talking. "I couldn't look at them first. But slowly I managed and got friendly. They are very charming," said a student from the normal school. "We have never worked in this kind of a community. We do projects, but not with these kind of children," said a student who found this community as an amazing experience.

A parent told: "Our children need a community. When everyone is the same, they don't feel discriminated." Several parents told: "Teaching must happen this way. Putting them to a classroom actually restricts their movement. They need a different pattern of teaching. It should happen in a creative and a positive environment."

## **IV. DISCUSSION**

The findings related to students with SEN revealed that they felt happy on being able to voice their hopes, wishes, emotions, and abilities, through the ethnodramatherapy performance. It was a forum for the expression of their realities. Happiness is considered a variable affecting psychological wellbeing (Ghasempour et al., 2013). What they said and did was 'meaningful' (Lyubomirsky, 2005) for them, and supported in building their identity. The performance was an effort to deconstruct the old self and creating of a new identity, through the process

of rehearsal, performance and post-performance sessions (Snow et al., 2003, p. 74).

Ethnodramatherapy performance had an impact on the self-esteem of the students. The findings confirmed that the learned patterns of behavior of children changed after the performance. Their change was seen as silence, or reduced restless behavior. Knowing that one is an able-bodied person creates a sense of self-worth. The intellectual and emotional involvement in the performance would have caused greater personal satisfaction in them that contributes towards developing a positive self-concept.

This ethnodramatherapy performance helped the students with SEN to regulate their emotions and behaviours. It was a training ground for social interaction, or a method of teaching social behaviours (Szafrńska, 2014). The performance was directed towards and enriched with contents which stimulate personal development and expose the full potential of every student. They experienced social interactions within the group, self-affirmation through being accepted by the group, and connected with gaining new, diverse and emotionally engaging experiences (ibid, p. 187).

The students gained a sense of mastery and control, as they were practicing for real-life events; expressing hopes and wishes; experimenting with new roles and situations; and developing a sense of identity. Play therapist Robert Grant says,

*When children can learn to self-regulate, possess social skills that relate to the environments they are asked to function in, and learn appropriate and meaningful relationship connection, they are less likely to have behavioural issues and more likely to function successfully in their day-to-day environment," (cited in Ranasinha, 2015).*

The community was a vital space for the student to grow. The ethnodramatherapy intervention helped the student to experience pride and validation, to develop the child's self-esteem and self-confidence, and to encourage self-expression, within a community. This current study considered group work as an essential aspect of the whole research project, for two reasons: to enable the student to relate and draw support, enrichment and enjoyment from each other, and to provide increased social opportunity (Casson, 2004, p. 224).

The group work foster an integrative group experience, with elements of working as a creative arts therapy group, a social group, a learning group, an

expressive group, and a playgroup. Helping, sharing, interdependence, social organization, interaction, and cohesion were visible in the group, helping the students with SEN to feel secure and comfortable.

It is assumed that the whole process of ethnodramatherapy performance is a form of group psychotherapy. It was performed for a public audience. The 'performance' can evoke a sympathetic appreciation and acceptance of themselves. The acts of expression and the affirmation promote growth and positive change. Therefore, a vital part of the performance was the audience. There was response from the audience, while the performance was taking place, and that interaction helped the students to see their importance. The audience response enhanced motivation of the students, having an impact on their self-esteem and self-confidence. The ethnodramatherapy performance has the potential to defy stereotypes, engage in a discourse on disability, and thereby challenge preconceived notions and societal barriers towards accepting diversity.

## V. CONCLUSION

The ethnodramatherapy presentation enabled the students with SEN to express their realities. It contributed to develop their self-esteem, and self-confidence, enhancing their psychological well-being. The ethnodramatherapy performance can easily be transformed into enriching experiences of growth, if educators and society appreciate and respect these students' profile of abilities and challenges. Furthermore, this research may open opportunities for other studies on ethnodramatherapy with different communities whose empowerment is very much essential. The study endorses the view that every special educational school ought to listen to student voices, to create an emotionally secure environment.

---

## REFERENCES

- Antonelli, L., Bilocca, S., Borg, D., Borg, S., Boxall, M., Briffa, L., Debono, C., Falzon, R., Farrugia, V., Gatt, L., Formosa, M., Mifsud, D., Mizzi, K., Scurfield, L., Scurfield, M., & Vella, G. L. (April-June, 2014). Drama, Performance Ethnography, and Self-Esteem: Listening to Youngsters With Dyslexia and Their Parents. *SAGE Open*, 1 –15.

- Brewer, J. D. (2000). *Ethnography*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
- Centre for the Arts in Human Development (CAHD) (2012). *Ethnodramatherapy: A New Methodology As Applied To Diversity Training Outreach*. Montreal: University of Concordia.
- Chang, H. (2008). *Autoethnography as method (Developing qualitative inquiry)*. San Francisco Bay Area, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Daniel, S. (2011). In step with music they could not hear. ('Sunday Times' 17<sup>th</sup> April) [http://www.sundaytimes.lk/110417/Plus/plus\\_24.html](http://www.sundaytimes.lk/110417/Plus/plus_24.html)
- Dissanayake, O., Panditaratne, M. T., Waas, C., Adikari, C. B., Indika, S., & Jayasekara, I. (2016). *Identification of Special Education Needs of Primary School Children in Sri Lanka*. The Research Centre, Post-Graduate Institute of Management, Sri Lanka.
- Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: An overview. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 12(1), 1-18.
- Kanu, S. A. (2008). Special Needs Education in Perspective. In: A. Olabisi (ed.) *Child Care and Special Needs Education in Nigeria* (pp 1-12) Jos. Centre for Learning Disabilities and audiology.
- Kodagoda, A. (2015). *Sunera Foundation's 20-year journey to change societal prejudices*: ('Sunday Observer' 11<sup>th</sup> October). <http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2015/10/11/spe01.asp>.
- Michelson, E. (2011). Autobiography and selfhood in the practice of adult learning. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 61, 3-21.
- Mienczakowski, J. (2001). Ethnodrama: Performed research – limitations and potential. In P. Atkinson, A. Coffey, S. Delamont, J. Lofland and L. Lofland (Eds.). *Handbook of Ethnography* (pp. 468-476). London: Sage Publications.
- Mienczakowski, J. (1995). *The application of critical ethnodrama to health settings*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Griffith University, Australia.
- Mienczakowski, J., Smith, R., & Sinclair, M. (1996). On the road to catharsis: A theoretical framework for change. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 2(4), 439-462.
- Mohan, S. R. (2007). *Vidivu- a special treat...* ('The Nation' 08<sup>th</sup> April). <http://www.nation.lk/2007/04/08/eyefea7.htm>
- Perera, N. T., Wijerathne, I. S. D., Wijesooriya, M. M., Dharmarathne, A. T., & Weerasinghe, A. R. (2014). A Game Based Learning Approach to Enrich Special Education in Sri Lanka. *International Journal on Advances in ICT for Emerging Regions*, 07 (2).
- Ranasinha, R. (2015). *Creative Arts Therapies for Autistic Children*. Author publication.
- Saldana, J. (2011). *Ethnotheatre: Research from page to stage*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Saldana, J. (Ed.). (2005). *Ethnodrama: An anthology of reality theatre*. New York: Altamira Press.
- Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research*. London: SAGE.
- Snow, S., D'Amico, M., & Tanguay, D. (2003). Therapeutic theatre and well-being. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 30 (2): 73–82. Accessed March 6, 2012. DOI: 10.1016/S0197-4556(03)00026-1.
- Tangen, R. (2008). Listening to children's voices in educational research: Some theoretical and methodological problems. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 23(2), 157-166.
- Tillmann, L. M. (2009). Speaking into silences: Autoethnography, communication, and applied research. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 37(1), 94-97.
- Sunday Observer (2014). *Samanalayaya 2014: Differently-abled showcase their potential*. <http://archives.sundayobserver.lk/2014/07/27/mon10.asp>
- Wickremesooriya, S. F. (2015). A Right To Speak And A Right To Be Heard. *Canadian Journal of Action Research*, Volume 16, Issue 1, pages 3-21.