



## Review Article

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## Creative Dramatics as a Psycho-Dramatic Therapy for Children with Special Needs: A Study of Sylverster Nwokedi's Mr Book

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**Abstract:** Children with special needs are increasing all over the world. These are children who have some form of disabilities or developmental delay and thus, cannot be placed in the regular classroom like other children. This paper examines the role of creative dramatics as a therapeutic process for children with special needs. However, through dramatic explorations, the children experience different realities and situations which give them the chance and leverage to express and perceive their world and the world around them from varying perspectives, thus leading them to growth, development and productivity.

**Keywords:** Therapy, Children, Growth, Development and Productivity.

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## INTRODUCTION

The educational system present in the society today displaces children with special need and places them at a disadvantaged position. The future of these children needing special attention becomes bleak and unproductive. Leo Tolsloy opines thus;

The school will, perhaps, not be a school as we understand it with benches, blackboards, and a teacher's or professor's platform – it may be a panorama, a theatre, a library, a museum, or a conversation... (23)

Leo Tolstoy supports the inclusion of other forms of information exchange as educative, and a school of learning. Drama and theatre all over the world have been employed as a teaching art form especially during the medieval era. "The medieval church taught through the medium of mystery plays and, in so doing, helped to restore theatre to its proper place as a great art form". Nellie McCalin further opines that:

The influence of the British theatre – in – education (TIE) companies and drama-in-education on America schools and producers of children's theatre began a new era in the seventies... leaders insist that every subject in the curriculum can be taught through drama. (258)

The inclusion of drama-in-education in the pre-primary schools serves a utilitarian purpose both for

children in the regular classrooms and for children with special needs. This provides an opportunity for children to perceive life in varying perspectives, thus developing from personal experiences. It is therefore, to this end that the paper examines the role of creative dramatics as a psycho-dramatic therapy for children with special needs.

## MEANING/CONCEPT OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

According to Fuandai (2010):

Special needs children are those children who cannot benefit from the regular classroom teaching/learning experiences on account of physical, mental, emotional and other sundry disabilities, which may or may not be easily identified. (145-146).

Special attention given to children with special needs is the bedrock for their development and a process that leads to their becoming productive members of the society. It is unfortunate to note that in most parts of Africa, especially in Nigeria, children with disabilities or development delay are discriminated against and often pejoratively referred to as "less-privileged".

This creates a certain feeling of stigmatization that invariably affects the productive level of the child in the society. Some parents who are financially

incapacitated leave their children at home without basic education or any form of learning, they treat them only with pity rather than seek professional service care centres that would improve their social, physical, cognitive, communicative and developmental skills.

Notwithstanding, children with special needs can be categorized into various groups; the physical challenged, the displaced children as a result of terrorism, war or viral epidemics, and the disadvantaged etcetera. In explaining further, Fuandia Cornelius asserts that children with special needs can also be:

Children of nomadic pastorals, migrant fishermen, migrant farmers, hunters, etc. They are those who, due to their lifestyles and means of livelihood are unable to have access to the conventional educational provision and therefore require special education to cater for their particular/peculiar needs and circumstances. (146)

It is therefore, the fundamental right of every child to have basic education and care irrespective of any social, economic, psychological, biological or environmental constraints. But to properly cater for children with special need, there is need for an inclusive education and child care programmes in primary education. The unique features and potentials of drama and theatre places it as a veritable tool for child care programmes and also as a tool to teach other subjects for children with special needs. Morstad Marissa in her view opines:

Drama has been established as a creative arts therapy and an action-oriented psychotherapy, and valued as an educational tool... (ii)

With the assertion of Morstad Marissa, it can be deduced that, drama (creative dramatics) is a therapy that can improve the mental, emotional and intellectual development of a child with special needs. Therefore, it is not wrong to conclude that creative dramatics contains therapeutic endowments that can bolster the growth and development of every child especially children with special needs.

### **The Essence of Role-Play for Children with Special Needs**

Dramatic experiences for children are not necessarily to make them become better actors in the future but rather to explore themes that are creatively employed in the dramatic experiences which are focused on instructing and educating the child at the same time be a source of entertainment for them. However, through role play children with special needs gain experiences that foster their communicative, social and cognitive skills. Supporting this assertion, Bosah et al. (2015) state:

Dramatic play has some educational purpose/value. It fosters creativity of thoughts, imagination, strategies for problem solving and

the development of divergent thinking ability. (546)

The use of dramatic experience allows the children understand other people's attitude, and behaviour other than theirs, providing the chance to reach certain judgement, resolve conflicting ideas and issues by themselves. Duruaku (2008) defines role play:

...as an experience around a specific situation which contains two or more different view points ... participants adopt and act out role of characters, or parts that may have personalities motivations, and backgrounds different from their own. (91).

Lesly Hendy and Lucy Toon expand further the definition of Duruaku (2008) in line with children engaging in role playing:

Children are not simply copying what they have seen, but adding their own ideas. In their imaginative world children can experience things that cannot be realized in reality... pretend play reveals how children use it to sort out their understanding of their world and gain control over events... children knowingly manipulate actions and event to create new worlds or confirm old ones. (10)

In the case of children with mental disorder, drama has been employed as a therapy by medical practitioners to reposition the child in the society. Homeyer & Morrison (2008) buttresses:

Play provides physical activities, so that "playing out" the event assists the brain in moving the memory from the nonverbal parts of the brain to the frontal lobes. (211)

The frontal lobe in humans enables a person think through life events, because it is the frontal lobe that provokes "planning, organizing, problem-solving, selective attention, personality and a variety of higher cognitive functions including behaviour and emotion (Gordon Johnson, n.p.). Through role-play, the child embodies two personalities, that of himself and the character he enacts, making him gain mastery of himself and understand other realities as earlier mentioned. The essence of role-play as a tool for a child with special need cannot be over emphasized. It is an established dramatic technique that is recognized in the medical field and by medical practitioners. This is expressed explicitly in the words of Homeyer & Morrison (2008) when they state that:

Occupational therapists, child-life specialists, speech therapists, physical therapists, and many other human service providers use therapeutic play with toys and games to facilitate treatment goals respective to their disciplines. Such play engages children and helps prepare them for surgical procedures, encourages verbalization,

and aids the development of gross and fine motor skills, among other benefits. (213)

Therefore, the essence of role play for children with special needs has a conjugal relationship with the growth and development of that child and should necessarily be included in the educational system and curriculum in preprimary and primary education.

### **Creative Dramatics as a Psycho-Dramatic Therapy for Children with Special Needs in *Mr Book***

Drama in education otherwise known as creative drama is an attempt to use drama as an educational tool for children at an early developmental stage. It is prescriptive both for children in the regular classroom and children with special needs. It is a dramatic experience that engages the children in dramatic performances for their well-being. Samuel Chukwu-Okoronkwo asserts inter alia:

Creative dramatics therefore, a purely classroom experience, is concerned with helping children to gain mastery over their intellectual and linguistic powers. It helps them to develop the ability of effective words usage in ordinary conversation, and at the same time allowing them to express and affirm their perception of reality and surrounding - the world around them. (47)

In the play *Mr. Book* by Nwokedi (2015), the children love Mr. Fun more than Mr. Book and that results to their poor performance in their examination except for Okeneme who embraces Mr. Book as her friend and comes out of the examination successfully. This is expressed in the conversation in scene six:

SEUN: Oh! God, this examination is too tough, my daddy will beat me when he sees my result.  
EFE: (sobbing) Do you know that I didn't write anything, I am very sure that I will fail and repeat this class? (16)

But Okeneme reproaches them defending the teacher who the other children blame for not teaching them well.

OKENEME: It is a lie; he taught us everything that came out. In fact, the questions were so easy and I finished mine.

JEMIMAH: Okeneme shut up, is it because the teacher praised you today that you are insulting us? (16)

They begin to quarrel among themselves and Ahmed pleads with them to stop the quarrel and find a solution to their problems.

AHMED: Stop it, please friends let us stop this quarrel and face the fact. Let us find out the secret Okeneme used in answering all those difficult questions from her. (17)

Okeneme told them her secret which is to embrace Mr. Book who will give them all knowledge they require to pass their examinations and also allocate time for fun and time to read. They turn a new leaf and become friends with Mr. Book.

ALL: ... please forgive us. We want to be your good, humble, polite, respectful and obedient friends. (18)

Mr. Book after much pleading from the children and Okeneme his very good friend, Mr. Book decides to forgive them and made them to promise not to be away with Mr. Fun but allocate time to play with him too.

MR. BOOK: (smiling) Ok I have forgiven you. You are now my friends but you must not hate Mr. Fun. Do you understand?

ALL: Yeees,,!! We are now your friends. We will not hate Mr. Fun, there will always be time for him... (19)

Through creative dramatics, children teach themselves as they participate in the learning process. Learning in an interesting way provides for the child with special needs an atmosphere of creativity, innovation and self expression; this makes drama a suitable tool for teaching other subjects through the technique of role-play. ABC Duruaku further expresses the importance of creative dramatics when he asserts that it is:

A method of instruction in the classroom situation thereby relating dramatic methods to education... it can serve a variety of purposes for improved human development by actively engaging the students in learning in an interesting and exciting way. (38)

Creative drama includes children in the learning process as espoused by Duruaku and exemplified in the play *Mr. Book*, the children resolved their problems themselves and sought a new experience of life, from failure to success.

Therefore, creative drama can be said to be therapeutic especially when children with special needs are engaged through role-playing and guided by teachers/counselors.

## **CONCLUSION**

Creative dramatics is an educational tool that is instrumental in fostering the development and growth of children with special needs. The dramatic performances explored by children through role-play provides the child with experiences of varying realities, divergent thinking abilities, problem solving skills and mastery of self which leads to an all-round development gamut. However, in the medieval field, creative dramatics is seen as a psycho-therapeutic tool for treatment of children with mental disorder in order to build up their social, emotional and cognitive skills when they embody different characters (role play) in a dramatic experiences. But it is unfortunate to note that in most parts of the world children with special needs are not given proper attention and care, they are often neglected and pitied as the "less privilege" of the society as they grow into adulthood thus remains unproductive. It is in the light of the above that the researcher recommends that:

- Creative dramatics should be introduced in the pre-primary and primary school curriculum as a teaching tool for other subjects in order to provide the child with quality education and care.
- Government should provide adequate care service centres for children with disabilities and/or displaced children who are often sufferers of socio-political crises or natural disasters. Care centres will benefit children in many ways especially to reposition them into the system and make them productive members of the society.
- Theatre practitioners and theatre departments should be encouraged to engage in children's theatre. In other words, teachers, counselors and care providers should be properly trained on how to use creative dramatics to teach children with special needs. Therefore, the early enrollment of children with special needs into care service centres by parents should be very well encouraged, because every child deserves the right to quality education, good health care and development.

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