

Using Movement as Speech in the Urban Classroom Setting

Kitsy Dixon, D.M.H.¹, Shantay Mines, Ed.S, LMFTA, QMHP²

ARTICLE INFO

Available Online January 2014

Key words:

creative arts;
dance movement therapy;
arts and community.

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes how after school mission programs in Black communities can benefit from expanding their curriculum to include pedagogies of creative expression to deal with continuous issues related to frustration and low performance in school. To build off of the concept of creative pedagogies, researchers of this paper explore an after school mission program, in Mississippi, who uses creative expression as a therapeutic inclusion in their curriculum and community with much success.

Introduction

The current literature on using dance/movement therapy for building resilience in young children and teenagers has presented continuous dialogue on how to communicate emotive responses from children to teachers in their classroom through use of creative movement (Tortora, 2005). Theoretical rationale for body movement-based approaches to emotional healing offers evidence that these creative modes of practice in the classroom, supports emotional healing in young children and teenagers who may struggle with expressing their emotions in healthy and productive ways (Tortora, 2005). The purpose of this research is to propose how creative movement can emotively speak the struggles and challenges a youth may experience without using words, but by using the body as response. This research has been effective in urban classroom settings where challenging environments produce more stress, aggression, and difficult experiences which present challenges in classroom behavior and the teacher-student relationship.

Creative Pedagogy

The dynamics of education in the classroom have caused teachers to find creative ways to incorporate technology, politics, and the media as part of growing discussions on sociological perspectives. The modern day classroom has had to identify the student as critic, by engaging students in pedagogies that will encourage them to adopt critical perspectives on both their actions and responses to societal challenges (Barnett, 1997). The atmosphere of learning in minority communities presents ongoing debates on whether the focus of school is on learning, or surviving, in these societal changes. Scholars have examined many contributing factors as to why minority students continue to struggle in academic settings (Lauer & Lauer, 2008; Kozol, 1991). Many of the factors that contribute to academic struggles are due to socio-economic status, family, and educational inequality (Lauer & Lauer, 2008; Macionis, 2007).

There appears to be a causal relationship between socioeconomic status and family differentiation mediated by psychological dimensions. This relationship perpetuates a multigenerational transmission process which creates a differentiation between parents and their offspring which develops obstacles in generational families that produce the need for more support, communication, and organization (Bobes & Rothman, 1998). The factor of socioeconomic status, unequal educational achievement, and differentiation of families, produces more struggle and more obstacles from the beginning of a child's educational journey to their adult endeavors in college than that of non-minorities (Lauer & Lauer, 2008).

Most commonly, the results found in the urban classroom are more frustration and aggravation from the lack of resources available both inside the classroom and in their surrounding communities. This frustration develops into oppression that occurs in the classroom in ways that dilute communication or stifle effective pedagogies that would help to deal with the responses to this oppression. Throughout small southern towns in the state of Mississippi, there are a number of afterschool programs emerging on the basis of creative

¹ Assistant Professor of Sociology at Centenary College, United States

² Marriage and family therapist, consultant, and continuing education provider for mental health and child welfare professionals

pedagogy (Naughton, 1993). Despite the stereotypes of afterschool programs being grounds for babysitting, southern towns have created ways to turn oppression into honest success. These afterschool programs are located in Black communities and the students that attend these programs range from kindergarten to high school.

Directors of these afterschool programs have stated that the framework of these programs needed to change in order to accommodate the struggling student. The curriculum for these after school programs covers subject matters that are not commonly specified in regular school curriculums, such as: sex education, teenage pregnancy, college preparation, writing for success, and anger and aggression management. Although these afterschool programs have had much success, they were struggling to find creative ways to deal with anger and aggression.

Afterschool Mission Programs in Mississippi

The implementation of afterschool programs in the state of Mississippi have internally focused on combining aspects of moral teachings, through religion, with daily social issues that present themselves as barriers in Black communities where students reside. In the surrounding towns of Southeast Mississippi, many agencies serving children and youth have coexisted as programs that provide both a mission and afterschool philosophies.

The purpose of a mission afterschool program is to provide a safe and nurturing environment for children and teens that foster a non-judgmental atmosphere, an embracing and celebration of their uniqueness, and opportunities to expand upon academic adventures through leadership demonstrations and partnerships with local community agencies (Fayette County Board of Education, 2009). In Southeast Mississippi, the addition of teaching moral values combine to produce curriculum which helps student's make effective life decisions and presents an arena of openly communicating with ordained clergy, certified counselors, and trained teachers, mentors, and tutors.

For this study, one particular after school program is identified in of mention is in Southeast Mississippi. This afterschool program is located in the heart of the community where students reside. The leader of this afterschool program, is both an ordained elder in the United Methodist Church and a certified Family Educator and the mission is to use the community as a positive aspect in the children's lives instead of a negative stigma associated with theories of aggression and frustration. What makes this afterschool program unique is that it has easy access to involve parents in every detail of the events, discussions, and projects offered in the community.

When asked if having the afterschool program only feet away from the Black community which has been ridiculed as being a part of the 'problem,' solve issues in the home and community, the afterschool director responded:

This is not a problem; this is a solution to what society makes a problem. Being that many of our children battle issues in their personal home life and then go to school and battle different issues in academics; it's vital to have parents and neighbors of the community involved in what is 1) going on in their children's lives, and 2) what is going on in their parents' lives.

When asked to expound upon how an after school mission program meets its goals of both academics and familial relationships, it was stated that each day children are picked up, by bus, from their individual schools and returned to the afterschool program where they are assigned tutors, on site, to help in their subject areas. After completion of homework, student's engage in snacks and activities that include a number of options that children partake in as community service including: Boy Scouts, Flag Football, College Bound, Math Club, Dance Team, Arts and Crafts, Teenage Boys and Girls Etiquette Classes, among many other activities. Once a month the parents of the community partake in a large discussion about issues going on directly in their community and how it affects family dynamics in their homes. On site to help answer questions are ordained pastors, elders, mentors, and counselors and community agencies. Also, each month designates opportunities to present workshops to bring together children and parents together through arts and entertainment.

As an observer, researcher, and movement activist in this environment for a year, this method brings success in this growing community by forging relationships between law enforcement, community agencies,

parents and children, and neighbors. The leader of this after school mission program states that this program creates safe spaces for community members. The looming question becomes, how 'safe' are safe spaces?

Historically, safe spaces were "safe" because they represented places where Blacks could freely examine issues that concerned their culture (Collins, 2000). The discussions of safe spaces analyze how Blacks have been excluded, through history, from social institutions that have stigmatized Black families as an oppressed and exploited people in the United States (Collins, 2000). Through the systematic history of oppression, Black communities in Mississippi have created safe spaces in their communities by creating social identity through use of their voices by stating that not all Blacks are oppressed in the same way, but as a collective group, the purpose of safe spaces in this particular community has been to produce thought patterns that oppose oppression and celebrate success; beginning with obstacles presented in the home and school.

A Case Study of Creative Movement as Dialogue in Practice

There are theoretical frameworks on how society views healing. Although our society provides a prescription for every ailment of complaint, alternative healing methods which concentrate on emotional healing often are overshadowed by quick fixes in our medical practice. This in part may be that alternative healing is identified as a humanistic construct of incorporating care, love, patience, and traditional bedside manners over prescribed medical treatment (Nelson, Nelson & Watson, 2011). Being that our societal views, medically, lack in ways to altruistically relate to the patient, it is theorized that without conscious attention to the importance of such relational bonds, both to the patient and the problem, optimal healing becomes a risk (Nelson, Nelson & Watson, 2011). Holistic healing is defined as healing mind, body, and spirit, but this healing comes by way of developing a relationship with the person in need (Nelson, Nelson & Watson, 2011). It is more than prescribing an oral medication, but it is identifying creative ways to heal the body, mind and spirit; thus the introduction, and importance, of alternative therapeutic healing.

In teaching dance movement therapy, researchers have observed and experienced movement to be therapeutic and a part of the holistic paradigm of healing. Being that dance movement therapy is categorized as 'therapeutic,' its healing modality is that of artful expression. Dance and movement therapy is based on the premise that mind and body are inseparable, that what is experienced in the mind is also experienced in the body (Levy, 1995, p. 1). The challenge of dance and movement therapy as a premise, challenges traditional frameworks of therapy, and therapists, by using movements of the body to verbally speak experiences of trauma. Dance movement therapy, better known as DMT, uses a theoretical framework of self-expression through the belief that self-expression facilitates personal growth and change and that verbalization alone, unaccompanied by affect, creativity, or motor action, cannot touch the full range of human feeling (Levy, 1995, p.1-2).

This observation of DMT has been credited with emotional healing from sexual abuse in men, women, children; borderline personalities, autism, addictions, and learning disabilities (Levy, 1989). The writers were asked to travel to some of the afterschool programs, in Mississippi, to teach movement to young children (ages 5-12) and teenagers (ages 13-15) who were struggling with issues of anger and frustration. The challenge was to find creative ways to turn their frustration into learning and communication.

On day one, the method of teaching creative movement was initially 'by the book,' meaning that our lessons were very much by the books of dance movement therapists and not ingredients administered by our own beliefs or talents. However, the students in the afterschool program also initially challenged the rudimentary methods by re-creating the foundations of creative movement. For these reasons, the pedagogy shifted from practical, historical, and theoretical frameworks to concentrating more on the direct experiences of the students' re-creation of structured concepts of dance and movement therapy. On day two of the program, students were simply asked to scream out that which had frustrated them the most throughout their day. This was the initial process of gaining the trust of the students. The role of teacher became lessened as the students began to critically think about those experiences that were most challenging to them, and displaying, through movement how these experiences made them feel.

By day five, many of the students had very similar movement patterns: stoic stances (representative of strength), curled positions on the floor (representative of fear), arms raised (representative of help), and

face covering (representative of shame). However, there was one student who stood straight, with his face protruding, and a very angry look. During observations about the students' movement of choice he stated, "This is the only movement I know. I'm always like this." Throughout the next several days, the creative observations of the other student's noticed that many of the boys mirrored this same movement of face protruding whereas the girls were more varied in their movements.

One of the most effective roles of DMT is the inclusion of certified therapists to help student's evaluate their emotive responses through movement. The combination of psychotherapy and DMT, supports the role of the therapist for such pivotal creative processes in coping with and integrating experiences of traumatic disturbances (Harris, 2007). Psychotherapist, Van der Kolk discusses the framework of effective Western psychotherapy where one "utilizes creative arts to develop a language that is essential for effective communication and for the symbolic transformation that can occur in psychotherapy (Harris, 2007). Van der Kolk further suggests that "the language of creative arts expression may indeed compensate for or even overcome difficulties in using words to convey feelings (Harris, 2007).

The role of the counselor was important in the classroom setting because each day we would begin the sessions by having student's scream that which frustrated them most. Students were then asked to think about those things that frustrated them most today, those things they were not able to properly communicate, and to create a movement dialoguing what that frustration was. With a present counselor in the room, we would sit down in a circle to process how each student defined the movement they chose for the day. The counselor would help student's process this information by helping them understand specific words which identified with their experience and expounded upon those repetitive words for clarification in their personal experiences of the day.

Many students stated that their particular movement stance was chosen because they couldn't communicate how frustrated they were in their living conditions. Students gave examples like, "I want a big house like my white friends," shared one middle school student. "I want to bring my lunch to school like normal kids. Everybody knows I'm on discounted lunch," shared an eighth grader. "I don't have a daddy," shared one eighth grade student. These responses really warrant no place in the daily schedule of an elementary, middle school, and high school setting. Outside of the creative movement, students were asked to voice and process their daily frustration. Their responses ranged as the following:

"Well, my teacher never really says anything to me. She just teach, she don't care."

"My school says I can go to the counselor to talk. That counselor don't live in my neighborhood."

"I get a lot of detention, ISS, and missed recesses because I act out in class."

"I get suspended. I don't care."

"Well, the afterschool program helps with some things. They give us food, let us use their computers, help us with our homework, but we still have to go home at night."

In analyzing each of these responses, there are recurrent feelings of teachers not genuinely caring about the well being of students; feelings of disconnect between counselors perceived as the inability to empathize or understand urban life; a display of behavioral issues in school as a way to express frustration and anger with fairly benign consequences; and suspension as a way to stay home to avoid seeing inequities or similarities in others. If not properly acknowledged in urban school settings, these feelings are high predictors of feeling neglected which can lead to depression and hopelessness. Vanessa Camilleri (2004) states that feelings such as these contribute to a mindset belief in there being external control over life events and the accompanying feeling of incompetence can lead to children feeling hopeless (p. 46).

"The belief is that desirable outcomes will not occur and that negative outcomes will occur, and that this state of affairs cannot be modified. Owing to an expectation of failure...at risk children see little point in being careful or law-abiding." (Camilleri, 2004, p. 46)

Despite the afterschool programs existence, students recognize the societal emotional process within their communities. The completion of the six week course brought together an entire ensemble presented to the community. It was quite impressive to see parents, city officials, teachers, and counselors from surrounding schools, come out to not only show support, but to discuss ways of how creative movement can be further implemented into everyday learning environments.

From Status Quo to Learning to Understand

There is literature produced by intellectuals that supports theoretical explanations of minority children and related societal factors which contribute to expanding research by intellectuals on the links between education and socio-economic status such as: substance abuse, domestic abuse, sexual abuse, and violence are pertinent issues in the community and family (Osofsky, 199; Garfield, 2005). However, in the realm of education and academic research, the exploration of identified oppressions can be appropriately linked to creative solutions such as creative movement, in an effort to create dialogue among students, teachers, counselors, and researchers.

The objective of using creative movement in its complexities is to find areas where reflection upon personal experiences and growth are identified. Witnessing the outcome of creative movement as a pedagogical element in inner city after school programs and neighborhoods contributed to strong classroom discussions with teachers and counselors which were pertinent in establishing motivational goals for the coming academic year.

Providing options for student's to express creativity in these programs has also presented children from inner city backgrounds with services that may not be afforded to them anywhere else such as the ability to process their anger and frustration. Lastly, there has also been evidence of ongoing classes and programs offering creative movement as an educational component for teenage girls after experiencing traumas associated with rape and sexual assault.

Using creative movement in the classroom increases awareness and understanding of maladaptive behaviors that many inner city minority children may experience. Much research has pointed towards creative movement as a direct way of identifying with emotions as dialogue indicators, as opposed to uncomfortable feelings created through tension. After trauma occurs, one of the challenges is verbally speaking the events of the experience or experiences. This difficulty, alexithymia, is a common occurrence after exposure to extreme stressors (Harris, 2009).

Dance Movement Therapy Model

Using a model such as creative movement may challenge the dance movement therapist to re-create a model of healing that accommodates individual student experiences that may even force the dance movement therapist to expand upon the direct links between psychotherapy and alternative healing through movement. In this researcher's particular model, a schema for understanding how movement can act as a mediator and messenger in the therapeutic process proved to be effective in drawing links between inner city minority children and anger-aggression. The use of movement as a form of non-verbal communication helped to provide insight on individual and collective behaviors, beliefs, and relationships within the community.

By restructuring the DMT model to include more individual analysis of experiences, this model provided advantages and disadvantages to a reduction of anger and aggression in a low socio-economic status environment. To this date, advantages have included reductions in suspensions, detention, and classroom behavior through teachers and counselors finding creative ways to have students express the frustrations of their day and offering the opportunity to create an environment of importance to foster safety in honestly expressing their feelings. Within the first observations, the students were very angry at not having had the opportunity, in the past, to have time set aside for 'venting,' but as the program endured, the researchers observed that student behavior had improved both inside and outside of the community and students were honest and more willing to talk about their experiences.

In conclusion, of the twenty-five children observed for this data, twenty are still a part of the after school program and have shown much improvement in communication. Seventeen children are still actively participating in creative movement courses or other modalities such as art and drama. In addition, all twenty children have taken on meaningful roles in improving their community's environment. The DMT model provides a holistic approach to psychosocial support through a modality which empowers, restores, and functions as a reliable result in clinical knowledge.

REFERENCES

- Garfield, G. (2005). *Knowing what we know: African-American women's experiences of violence and violation*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press
- Kozol, J. (1992). *Savage inequalities: Children in America's schools*. New York: Harper Perennial
- Lauer, R. & Lauer, J. (2008). *Social problems and the quality of life*. Boston: McGrawHill
- Levy, F. (1995). *Dance and other expressive art therapies: When words are not enough*. New York: Routledge
- Macionis, J. (2008). *Social problems*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson
- Osofsky, J. (1998). *Children in a violent society*. New York: Guilford Press
- Tortora, S. (2005). *The dancing dialogue: Using the communicative power of movement with young children*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press