

"Child Development, Arts Therapies, Education -- and Storytelling"

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A Folktale (versions of which are told in numerous cultures):

Once an old man was planting a seedling of an almond tree beside a road.

A young boy came by and asked him, "Old man, why are you planting that seedling? It would take many years before that seedling might grow into a tree and produce almonds. No offense, but you might not even be around what that might happen".

The old man looked up at the boy and said to him, "When I was a boy, I ate almonds, because someone had planted an almond tree. I am planting this tree so that members of the next generation -- maybe even you yourself -- might also have almonds to eat".

The boy replied, "Oh. Thank you!", and he continued on his way home.

Children wandering off into their own thoughts. Children wandering around the classroom. Staying with one activity, concentrating on it, for only a brief time.

Restless. Easily distracted -- even sometimes seemingly *seeking* distractions from the project at hand.

Children fighting with others. Not playing together cooperatively. Inflexible, demanding, impatient, wanting things instantly. Unskilled in the sharing, the give-and-take, and the taking-of-turns needed for successful playing and socialising.

Children who seem to be too internally rushed to think clearly, logically, and systematically -- and who are often unable to absorb and retain, and to creatively apply, information and patterns.

Children who do not connect and bond very strongly with their peers and teachers. Children who behave in self-centered and obstinate ways

However, put them in front of a TV, and they sit, entranced, for hours. If permitted to play games on electronic devices, they will do so endlessly.

These are the conditions of a growing number of children around the world today. More and more children are being diagnosed with conditions such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autism, and Dyslexia. One in ten children has been diagnosed with ADHD in the USA (Schwarz 2013). Even more children seem to have mild cases of one or more of these conditions.

Possible reasons include:

* From a child's infancy, many caregivers are using TV as a babysitter and sedative for the child. TV's often fascinating, brilliant, and rapidly changing images and sounds are designed to get one's attention, and to "hook" one into continuing to watch-and-listen, and to seek to obtain related products. External stimuli that do not grab the attention in similar ways are often not as attractive.

* The typical human diet (especially for children) increasingly includes the thrills of fat, salt, sugar, and artificial ("nature-identical") flavours and colours. Processed foods in general omit the complex nutrients and fibres found in whole grains, fruits, and vegetables -- which seem to be needed for physical and mental health.

* Pesticides utilised to grow food, and preservatives utilised to keep food from decomposing, may effect humans negatively -- as may plastics, air pollution, and the electronic signals that are constantly traveling around and through us (cell phone signals, broadcast TV and radio signals, etc).

* The nuclear family has become the norm, and the extended family has become the exception, as a living unit. Often there are no grandparents in a child's home to remind all of the past, and of the multi-generational aspect of the family. And children today often have few or no siblings.

* More than ever before, in many families there is economic uncertainty, and social uncertainty (the possibility or reality of parental separation and divorce).

* Traditional ways of doing, saying, understanding, making things -- and of making a living -- are often no longer valid, practical, or known. Today, instead, the knowledge-in-most-demand is often knowing how to do something on one's electronic devices.

Globally, in 2014, we humans in general are experiencing insecure and unsettled living. More and more adults -- one in 13, in the USA -- are taking medications for depression or anxiety (Mojtabai 2013). It is not surprising that so many children are also having a challenging time.

In India, an additional issue for many children is that they are attending English-medium schools. Just as they may be learning one or more Indian languages at home, these children are under pressure to also learn (oral and written) English.

This article suggests an approach that might help children to face these challenges more successfully.

Principles and methods of Child Development (for both ordinary and Special Needs children), Expressive Arts Therapy, and Early Childhood Education need to be utilised in an integrated manner. The distinctions between these three approaches are often artificial. Training in an integrated approach needs to be available on the formal, university level.

Expressive Arts Therapy is the integrated use of play, drama, storytelling, dance, music, visual art, etc, for therapeutic use.

Young children especially understand tangible things. Their ability to grasp and use abstractions comes later. Expressive Arts Therapy, and various Early Childhood educational approaches such as the Montessori Method, provide these tangible experiences.

These methods can also be used with older children and adults. As a person gets older, the discussion he/she may participate in after engaging in an art activity often becomes an especially productive part of the therapeutic/educational/developmental process.

Responding to the need for tangibility, in the field of storytelling there is a growing specialty alternately known as Sensory Storytelling, Multi-sensory Storytelling, and Tactile Tales (Wye 2014). This involves using a lot of props, and allowing listeners to touch the props as the story is being told.

Storytelling can include all of the other arts. Numerous aspects of storytelling can be used for Therapy, Development, and Education.

The storytelling process itself teaches children ways to socialise. Fantasy role-playing is inherent to the storytelling and story-listening processes, which provide interactive and engrossing workouts for participants' imaginations and thinking minds.

In terms of content, storytelling-related activities can help children learn ways of *making sense out of experience*.

Storying is the process of constructing and considering stories. Through storying, children can develop a *sense of story*.

A story can be defined as a series of events. One way we humans make sense out of experience is to organise experience into stories. Adults may take it for granted that in stories -- as well as in everyday life -- one thing may lead to another, occurrences may be connected, and actions may have consequences. But children have to learn these things -- and one way they can learn them is through storying.

Storying enables children to think in terms of sequences of events. This helps them to recognise patterns of behaviours and actions, in story and in life. It gets them in the habit of organising data into sequences that progress from a beginning, to a middle, to an end -- and hold together cohesively as a meaningful unit. This helps children learn to *put things together*.

Many Special Needs children -- and children in general -- benefit from storytelling-related activities for therapeutic, developmental, and educational goals.

Especially in India, the richest sensory and art activity is often reserved for Special Needs children. But children should not have to have Special Needs to be able to participate in arts-and-sensory-rich activities.

I sometimes think that in today's day and age, many children -- and many adults also -- are a little autistic (for example, may have a difficult time making connections with aspects of the world around them), and also are a little bit on the Attention Deficit Disorder side.

What is needed are M.Sc., M.A., and M.Phil. programs in colleges and universities in India that offer training in these three fields -- Child Development, Expressive Arts Therapy, and Early Childhood Education -- in an integrated way.

Regarding Training in Education (Teacher-Training)

Of course, there are many Education Depts in colleges and universities in India that offer teacher-training:

www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_teacher_education_schools_in_India .

www.studyguideindia.com/Colleges/Teacher-Training .

www.educationforallindia.com .

Some of these Departments offer training in teaching Special Needs children.

Regarding Training in Child Development

Mumbai --

Association for Early Childhood Education and Development (affiliated with the Tata Institute of Social Sciences), www.aeced.org .

New Delhi --

National Institute of Public Cooperation and Child Development, www.nipccd.nic.in , and

Children First, www.childrenfirstindia.com . Children First offers Therapeutic and Developmental services -- including Certificate Courses -- in an integrated way.

Many NGOs that work with Special Needs children also offer Courses for adults regarding ways to do this work. To give just one example:

Chennai --
Vidya Sagar, www.vidyasagar.co.in .

One may also study Developmental Psychology in Psychology Depts.

Regarding Training in Expressive/Creative Arts Therapy

Pune --
World Centre for Creative Learning Foundation offers a "Ten-month Certificate Course in Arts-based Therapy", www.wccf.org .

Bangalore --
Studio for Movement Arts and Therapies offers a "One-year Certificate Course in Creative Arts Therapies", www.smartmove.co.in/FCAT.html .

Chennai --
Women's Christian College (Psychology Dept), and the East-West Center for Counselling and Training, offers a "One-year Diploma Course in Expressive Arts Therapy", www.indianstorytellingnetwork.org/21.pdf . In India at present, this is the only such Course that, 1) is affiliated with a university, and 2) utilises storytelling as an organising principle.

Regarding Training in Storytelling

Certificate Courses are offered by,

Bangalore --
Kathalaya, www.kathalaya.org .

Chennai --
World Storytelling Institute, www.storytellinginstitute.org (including via videoconference).

About the author:

Dr Eric Miller, Director, World Storytelling Institute, co-leads the "Therapeutic Uses of Storytelling" component of the above-mentioned Expressive Arts Therapy Course in Chennai. Additional note: The World Storytelling Institute presents the annual Chennai Storytelling Festival. The theme of the upcoming edition of this Festival (scheduled for 6-15 February 2015), is "Storytelling for Teaching and Training". This Festival would culminate in a 2-Day Seminar at the University of Madras. In this Seminar, the entire day of Saturday 14 February 2015 would be dedicated to "Panel Discussions, with Demonstrations of Storytelling-related Activities" by and for adults who work with ordinary and Special Needs children, www.storytellinginstitute.org/2015.html .

References:

Ramin Mojtabai, "Clinician-identified Depression in Community Settings: Concordance with Structured-interview Diagnoses," *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics*, 2013, Vol. 82 (3), pp. 161-9.

Alan Schwarz and Sarah Cohen, "More Diagnoses of Hyperactivity in New C.D.C. Data," *New York Times*, 1 April 2013, p. 1.

Cassandra Wye, www.storiesinmotion.co.uk/tact.html .