

Dramatherapy With Vulnerable Girls on the Jamaican Shores

– “Handle With Care, Fragile Goods Inside”

A Reflective Account from the Eyes of the Dramatherapist

To maintain Anonymity of the Project in which this piece of work was conducted, the Dramatherapist will refer to the establishment as ‘The Unit’.

Dramatherapists’ Notes:

Pretty Faces of Innocence - Filthy Words from Learned Abuse

At first sight, the girls seem desperately in need.

Place of Safety?

Some would say,

But, behold - to my dismay,

Broken furnishings,

Tired Walls.

But most importantly of all,

A Home for Residents offering comfort and support,



Whose stories of are so rich and pure.

Childhoods snatched away and womanhood forced upon them.

In desperate need for Hope,

They DO exist as do their rose petals,

Still a budding red stained with blood ...

As the stories Unfold ...

Background

On completing my Dramatherapy training at Roehampton University in the United Kingdom, I had a strong need to return to my **ethnic roots** and complete my first piece of work on qualification, in the homeland of my parents in Jamaica, West Indies.

The Project was set up 6 months prior to my departure from the UK, as there were procedures that needed to be put in place, i.e. establishing links with the key Senior members of staff at the Unit; identifying and making contact with an appropriate Project Manager; researching the Child Development Agency in Jamaica; establishing and creating an appropriate programme which would incorporate the practice of Dramatherapy to meet the needs of the client-group; creating an appropriate referral process and protocols for staff in Jamaica to complete; drafting a Service Level Agreement to outline the requirements of the

placement; identify and outline issues of confidentiality and consent in order to make this publication using data from the clients, and collating literature on the Safeguarding and Child Protection procedures in place at the Unit and on the island of Jamaica.

The Unit is a Place of Safety for Girls situated in the North coast of Jamaica. Hidden away amidst the forestry and off-road track, it was a far world apart from the All-Inclusive luxury resort that I resided in for the duration of my stay on the island.

The Unit is home to 70 girls and is a secure building offering Education, Care, Guidance and Support to all of its residents.

The introduction of Dramatherapy to this organisation was a pioneering exercise, as it had never before been used at the Unit. Although the Unit advertises that they use therapeutic tools and

techniques in their work with the girls, Dramatherapy was a somewhat pioneering exercise which both excited me, as well as the staff at the Unit. Working in a new climate and culture with different social pressures exposed me to a new way of working, which meant that I had to be flexible in my practice, expectations and ability to adjust to fitting into the requirements of my new working environment.

Setting up the project took a lot longer than originally planned, mainly due to the much slower pace in Jamaica. An apt example of this was responses to emails. Whereby, I would expect that emails in the United Kingdom would be responded to within a few working days; correspondence with the Unit took a lot longer. The emails were rarely responded to and would need to be chased up by a UK-based partner who was residing in Jamaica, who would have to often act as the mediator in order to open the communication channels between myself and the Manager at the Unit.

On arrival to the Unit, my first exposure to the children was in the communal Yard during recess. I immediately witnessed a very colourful variety of body movements from the girls. I use the term 'colourful' because the movements were either bright or energetic movements or dark, withdrawn or still. One observation that I was immediately drawn to was the power of music with this client group. Some of the girls were openly and confidently singing and dancing provocatively amongst their peers to determine who had the best moves, whilst others were slumped under a tree in the shade with an air of helplessness with subtle movements or no movement at all. This brought me back to the theory of Embodiment (Jennings, 2010) where it was outlined that dramatic work and movement can be used to transform the inappropriate movements and to enhance those who faced difficulty in utilising their moving bodies in positive, effective and creative ways.

The Programme...

The **Hero's Journey** was designed as a brief, 5-day intervention to introduce different distancing and projective dramatherapy techniques, whilst enabling the girls to travel through their individual stories in search of their hero which, they eventually discover, lies within themselves.

Each session lasted 90-minutes on each of the five consecutive days.

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The group members consisted of participants who had:

- ❖ suffered sexual and/or physical abuse by adult figures of trust in their lives by the tender age of 8 years old
- ❖ (*two clients*) a deceased parent
- ❖ (*three*) no idea where their parents were
- ❖ (*some*) been taking medication to manage their psychosis. I only discovered this when I overheard staff calling for some of the girls during the initial session to go to the Nurse. I enquired with the member of staff on the room with me and she confirmed that some of the girls had a psychological diagnosis. This was interesting to note that this was not identified with me during the referral process, which sheds light on the perception of mental health at the Unit.
- ❖ (*one client*) been actively self-harming and was having regular suicidal thoughts

Aims of the Programme:

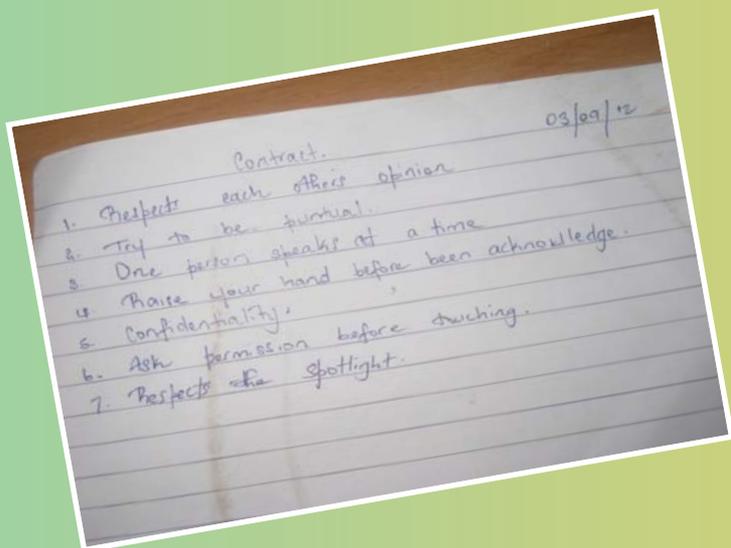
1. To engage clients in 'play' as a way of re-engaging with their childhood
2. To introduce clients with therapeutic distance-based methods, i.e. Object Transition, E-P-R (Embodiment-Projection-Role – Jennings, 2010) and Story-Telling (Lahad, 1991 – cited in Jennings, 1993), as a way of giving voice to the unconscious language
3. To create a safe space in the current setting as a way of inviting clients to gain an insight into their inner emotions and explore the stories behind them
4. Measure the impact of the therapeutic tools used on personal development

Research from Bannister (2006) confirms that children who suffer from abuse from an early age, often and understandably, grow up to have issues with trust as adults (cited in Meekums, 2006).

During the initial session, when the girls were asked collectively, what they would like to get out of the programme, they responded:

- ❖ Anger management strategies so as not to snap at other girls/staff when they felt angry
- ❖ Expression – to be able to express their feelings with others without offending
- ❖ To trust others

Once the Working Agreement was drafted, the therapeutic journey began! (Please see photograph below).



girls to cry at the onset because she said that she felt so relaxed and free from tension.

In the communal Yard, I observed that the girls were very different, some louder than others – but all demonstrating their feelings from their behaviours and their ‘unsaid’.

One girl in the group observed me jump at the sound of a girl having a fight outside the room whilst staff were trying to part them. The girl looked at me and sneered “Look pon him (‘him’ was referred to either gender in patois), him a jump cause him ‘fraid’.” I took a moment to share with the girl that I was afraid; afraid for the pain that the girl outside had just endured. It was at that moment, that we both exchanged a longing stare, that we were different but also so similar, in that we were aware that pain and violence evoked sadness in others.

The use of music was utilised in a guided imagery for the girls during day three. The girls all fell asleep in the ritual space and looked so peaceful – yet exhausted. So part of that session was to offer a space of rest for the girls. I gently woke them up with the repetitive beating of the drum and did not hasten them to wake. It was beautiful to watch and brought a tear to my eyes, when the girls shared that to be woken up so peacefully was not a regular event for them, as they were often woken up from their dormitories by the sounds of chaos from the other girls.

The final leg of the Journey was on Day 5, when there was an acknowledgement of the internal hero in each and every one of the girls, as they were alive and they had made it! They were still in the World, still having so much to ‘give’ and share. To celebrate, there was a catwalk enactment with music.

Each girl took it in turns to strut their stuff down the aisle. What was magical here was that the group decided, at that moment, to rip off the sheets and expose their sense of achievement with the rest of the Yard! The other girls came rushing from their rooms, the Yard, the canteen and their classrooms with staff to witness the catwalk and the achievement. These girls bloomed with confidence and allure ... they really did make it!

The girls appeared very keen to establish a way of working together and were particularly attracted to the item of being heard. Having a say in the ‘setting up’ of the group, appeared somewhat empowering for most of the girls. There was a flair of excitement in the air, as each girl took a role in the group as a way of establishing her place. What was fascinating to observe was the fact that at on arrival to the Unit on the second day, some of the girls had prepared themselves early and were waiting outside the therapy space in the sweltering heat, eager to set up the room. Indirectly, what were the girls trying to communicate? I explored this at length in clinical supervision and what surfaced was how important the ‘unsaid’ was and seemed to have more validity than what the girls physically verbalised. The depth of trauma from their stories was so entrenched that even revisiting their stories was visibly causing emotional pain as well as a sense of relief. They were very proactive in re-inventing the room space with the white sheets donated from the hotel, creating the circle with the chairs, switching on the fans and ensuring privacy by placing the remaining white sheets at the shutters. There was something quite calming and peaceful about the space once the room had been set up. The cool breeze blew through the shutters, causing the sheets to shudder in a battle between the external wind and the internal breeze from the electric fans. Quite a contrast to the sounds of rage, shouting, derogatory words, shrieks and banging coming from the communal yard just outside, I thought.

It was then, that it dawned on me that there was something magical about this intervention, something much deeper and meaningful than simply ticking a strategic box to measure impact. These girls were coming for healing, for escapism from their internal noises, chaos and trauma – they were coming for safety and love.

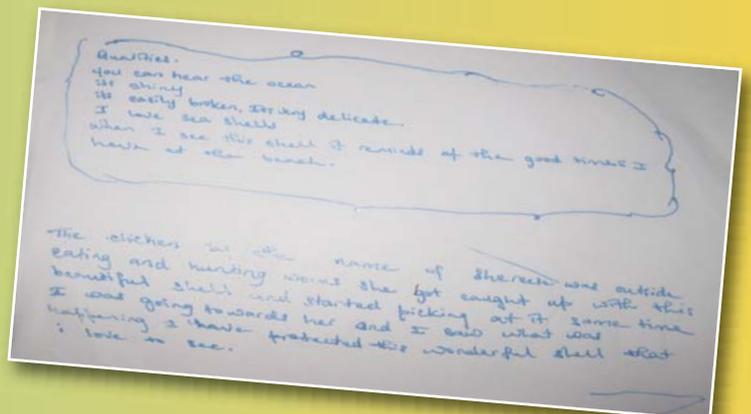
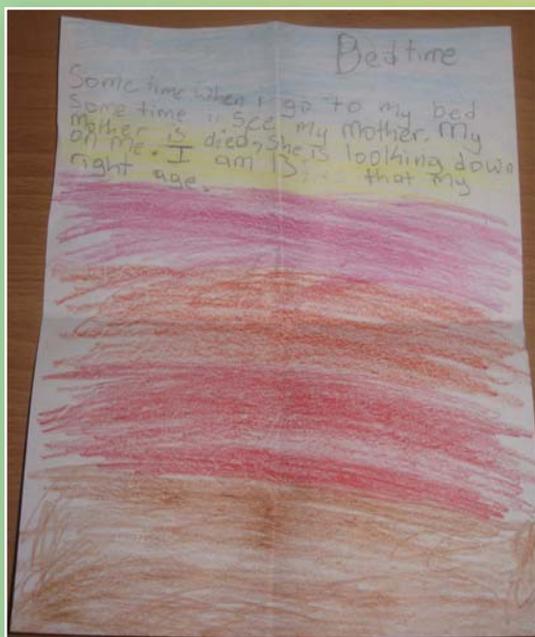
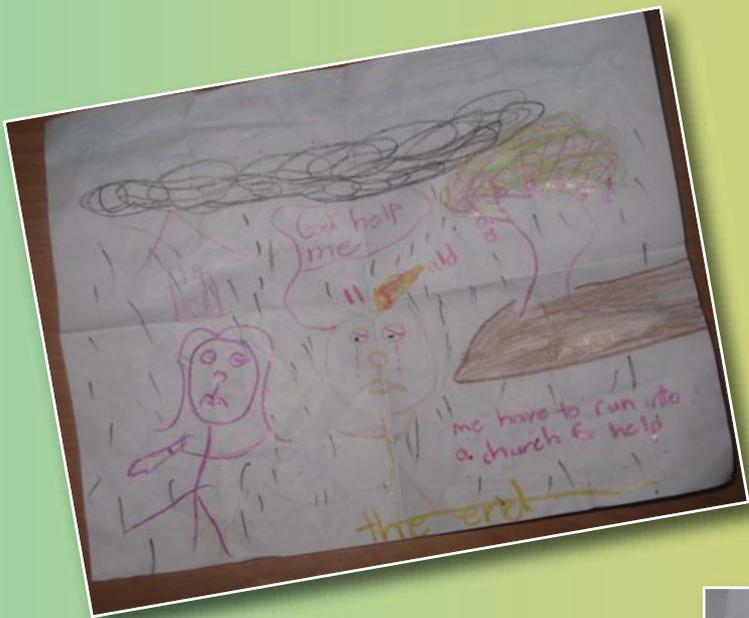
The process over the 5 days was an interesting one – the responses were much different from what was the ‘norm’ in the United Kingdom. Allowing a space for the girls to cry and ‘check-in’ with their feelings was very new for them. To be asked how they feel and for it to be OK to not answer was something that was so foreign to them, it caused one of the



When we had the final circle check-out ritual with a celebratory cake, the girls made a silent protest not to leave by staying seated. This caused me a little discomfort because I was finding this 'ending' very difficult, as well as triumphant. I was sad to be leaving and asking the girls to depart from this journey, but I was so proud and triumphant about their achievement and ability to stay with the process, even when the emotional pain was uncomfortable – they shared their stories and they found the courage to reveal them in the room and leave it there.

Collectively, the girls said that they wanted to leave me with their Six Piece Stories and other samples of work as a gift – their token of appreciation and their 'unsaid' of leaving their stories with me, as they were able to psychologically and therapeutically purge and return to their realities ... the safety of The Unit.

Below: Samples of work



Evaluation

Eight girls completed the 5-day programme and rated the overall delivery of the programme 8 out of 10 (where 10 is excellent and 1 is Poor).

The term to describe the Dramatherapist, which came up frequently on the evaluation form was 'mother.' From the onset of the intervention it became evident from the responses of the girls that they were deeply missing the love of a mother and, unconsciously, this medium of therapy enabled the Dramatherapist to slot into that role, which was very healing and 'holding' for the girls.

The following responses were extracted from the Evaluation forms:

What was enjoyed most about the programme:

"I enjoyed the Six-Piece Story because it reminded me of my family"

"When I had time to cry"

"I enjoyed making a contract ... the teacher (dramatherapist) was there was us (sic) ... even when we feel bad, she encouraged us"

What did you learn about yourself?

"I have learned how to manage my anger and I do not have to only use words, but I can use art and drama"

"I learned that I am loved"

"To be who I am and not what other people want me to be"

What Next...?

I knew in my heart, as I walked away from the Unit that this would not be the end for me.

When I was a student of Dramatherapy, I used my skills throughout my training at my current place of work at a Secondary school in London which is greatly received by the students and is supported by staff. I have now secured two days a week as a Dramatherapist in the school, one day a week delivering Family Therapy and the other two days managing a staff team of Learning and Emotional Wellbeing Mentors.

However, I really found a deep joy in donating this service to the children of Jamaica. The process of stepping into the unknown and having no idea where my own personal journey would begin or end is what was so endearing about this project. So many hearts were touched, including mine, from the girls and the staff at the Unit, the staff and guests at the Hotel, my driver, my supervisor and my placement manager – the spontaneous tokens of love, donations, words and support was truly overwhelming.

The slogan for Jamaica is **"... out of many, one people"** and that message lies within me today after embarking on this enriching journey.

I hope that this work can expand and introduce other forms of Arts Therapy to the island for the children of Jamaica to access. I have been working with my Church to raise funds for the girls and will return to provide therapeutic interventions with the additional resources for practical support, such as clothes, books, toiletries ... etc., which the fund will pay for.

For more information on my work, you can find me on Linked-In.

Watch this space....

Judy Harrison

With Special Thanks to:

Karleen Jackson (Project Manager – Jamaica), Lili Levi (Clinical Supervisor – United Kingdom) and the Management and Staff at the Hotel I resided in (name of hotel will not be mentioned to reinforce confidentiality of the clients).

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