Life skills building in Orphan and Vulnerable Children through NalandaWay Foundation, India

1. Introduction

Tens of millions of children live in the streets of cities scattered all over the world. Some estimates put the number of street children living in India's six most populous cities at 500,000. In 2004, out of the total juveniles, the share of homeless children who were involved in various crimes was just 7.5 percent. In Tamil Nadu, there are over 1200 orphaned and destitute children rescued and residing in the Government Homes.

Children and young people housed in such residential care centres are emotionally disturbed; they frequently have been physically abused, are prone to violent behaviour and may have been involved in crimes. They often fare poorly in school, shout or physically fight to handle social conflicts and are very likely to engage in risky behaviours (substance use, or unprotected sex). Furthermore, they struggle to make successful transitions to the community.

NalandaWay Foundation has initiated a project to reduce behaviour problems and enhance life-skills of the children residing the residential care centres like Children homes, Observation homes and Special homes in Tamil Nadu. A Baseline study was conducted in every home and it was identified that children lacked in life skills and that arts-based intervention was the immediate need. The approach, methodology, process and findings are presented in this report.

To reach these goals, the project would provide weekend training to the children in one of the following forms of arts:

- Theatre
- Fine Arts
- Music
- Literature

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Introduction

While no one seems to know how many children actually live on the streets worldwide, many reports cite a UNICEF estimate of 100 million. Whether the children live on the streets or spend the majority of their days on the streets, experts are concerned about their vulnerability to terrorist organisations, crime, and HIV infection. The need for teaching life skills to the orphan and vulnerable children in critical situations and the effectiveness of teaching through arts is emphasized by a lot of reports treating pedagogical methodologies. Still, there arise a lot of questions concerning the combination of both and the psychological processes involved in educating through arts aiming at behavioral changes in children. This review aims to deliver an overview through analysis of current psychological approaches involved in arts education and some of the programmes which combine life skills with learning through arts.

2.2. Understanding Life skills - Explained

The World Health Organization has defined life skills as, “the abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life”.

UNICEF defines life skills as “a behaviour change or behaviour development approach designed to address a balance of three areas: knowledge, attitude and skills”. The UNICEF definition is based on research evidence that suggests that shifts in risk behaviour are unlikely if knowledge, attitudinal and skills based competency are not addressed.

Life skills are essentially those abilities that help promote mental well-being and competence in young people as they face the realities of life. Most development professionals agree that life skills are generally applied in the context of health and social events. They can be utilised in many content areas: prevention of drug use, sexual violence, teenage pregnancy, HIV/AIDS prevention and suicide prevention.

2.2.1. Life Skills Strategies and Techniques
UNICEF, UNESCO and WHO list the ten core life skills strategies and techniques as: problem solving, critical thinking, effective communication skills, decision-making, creative thinking, interpersonal relationship skills, self awareness building skills, empathy, and coping with stress and emotions.

2.3. Outcomes of Life Skills-Based Education

Programmes aimed at developing life skills have produced the following effects: lessened violent behaviour; increased pro-social behaviour and decreased negative, self-destructive behaviour; increased the ability to plan ahead and choose effective solutions to problems and improved self-image, self-awareness, social and emotional adjustment. These programmes have further increased acquisition of knowledge; improved classroom behaviour; gains in self control and handling of interpersonal problems and coping with anxiety; and improved constructive conflict resolution with peers, impulse control and popularity. Research studies have also shown that sex education based on life skills was more effective in bringing about changes in adolescent contraceptive use; delay in sexual debut; delay in the onset of alcohol and marijuana use and in developing attitudes and behaviour necessary for preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Approaches to psychology of learning

Imparting life skills through arts education is considered to be of great value to the orphan and vulnerable children. The following is an overview of popular approaches concerning the psychological procedures of learning:

Gardner (2007) is a defendant of the Multiple Intelligences Theory. According to this theory, there are several independent modes of learning due to several inherent intelligences (bodily/kinesthetic, linguistic, logical/mathematical, interpersonal/social, naturalistic, intrapersonal/self-awareness) in each individual human being. Heathcote’s concept consists in the principle of life skills was more effective in bringing about changes in adolescent contraceptive use; delay in sexual debut; delay in the onset of alcohol and marijuana use and in developing attitudes and behaviour necessary for preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Wagner (1999) (Building Moral Communities through Educational Drama) emphasizes the fact that for new learning, previous knowledge and experiences in all areas should be activated. She also states that results can be surprising when working with arts because there are no clear single solutions to any arts exercise. She describes the relation between arts and personality as following: In other words, personality is inherently dramatic, and art is inherently psychological, suggesting the interdependence of the two.

Vygotsky developed the theory of social development according to which all learning is first social, then individual, emphasizing once more the importance of life skills for further learning. He also identifies dramatic tension as an essential element in personality development which supports the idea of combining education in life skills with arts. This suggests that the training should start with more of group activities before creating individual arts experiences.

Heathcote developed a methodology based on the use of drama in order to stimulate holistic learning. This methodology she developed found a broad resonance and a lot of applications. One of the main aspects of Heathcote’s concept consists in the principle of ‘the teacher empowering the student’, so their relation resembles a partnership. She emphasizes the importance of social qualities of the trainers which essentially leads to holistic learning.

Applied strategies/programmes

Short description of several programmes that treats life skills with arts:

Freeman, Fulton, and Sullivan (2003) worked with 3rd and 4th grade students who participated in creative drama activities, one day per week for eighteen weeks. As a result of their project they stated that the children displayed improved self-concept. It was achieved by providing the students with opportunities to gain personal confidence by working in an uncritical atmosphere.

Catterall is of big importance referring to The School Project; a programme on peer conflict resolution skills using drama with students, that went on over twenty-four weeks. The adolescents in the group used drama, theater, writing, and visual arts to create and act in original plays. Ninety-minute workshops took place after school, once a week, to provide the students with sufficient time for practice. In the course of the project, the participating students improved in expertise, critical thinking skills and self-motivation as well as motivating others. It was evident from some of the students expressing their desire to return as mentors for future students in the project.
The HEARTS Family Life Center consists in a facilitation of experiential learning in four fine arts areas: art, drama, music, and dance. The expertise aimed for includes in art: water-colors, oil painting, drawing, photography, collages, murals, crafts, pottery, skills of sculpting and printing. In drama the focus lay on plays, skits, creative writing, poetry, storytelling, stage setting; elements of technical theatre through lecture, demonstration, and participation. There was an average of two hours per week working on stagecraft, stage management, sound, scenic design, theatre history, and lighting included in the timeframe.

Effectiveness of different arts for teaching life skills
Referring to the specific art forms, Liane Brouilette stated in *How the arts help children to create healthy social scripts* that, drama and dance were the most effective art forms. But, she immediately states that the differences in the effectiveness may be due to different teaching styles of the trainers and do not have to be inherent in the art form itself.

James Catterall links certain art forms with specific life skills. So he concludes that:

- Exercises in Music lead to spatial reasoning and the ability to plan.
- Drama supports most interpersonal skills and dealing with conflicts.
- Dance provides self-confidence and social tolerance.
- Visual arts convey self-esteem and show positive effects on other learning processes.

As the general effects of a programme in arts Catterall mentions a development of cognitive, social and personal competencies. In *Social Skills Intervention for Students with Emotional/Behavioral Disorders: A Literature Review from the American Perspective* Kaili Chen mentions modeling and role play as widely accepted techniques for training in life skills which points again at the performing arts (dance, drama) as the most effective ones.

Aspects of concrete training programme

Important aspects of a training programme in life skills through arts which were mentioned in several documents include the continuity of the training programme and a confidential atmosphere during the lessons. Another means to create a good atmosphere is the appropriate use of rewards and praise. Chen stated in his article, *Social Skills Intervention for Students with Emotional/Behavioral Disorders* that multi-age group is a very useful technique as they provide more natural environment and are more effective than graded groups.

Conclusion

After an analysis of various psychological approaches and pedagogical methodologies currently involved in arts education and programmes which combine life skills with learning through arts, it was concluded that arts is definitely a ‘more-than-appropriate’ way for teaching essential life skills. The answer to reduce behaviour problems and to enhance the life-skills of these children was found to be ‘the idea providing them with experiential learning in four areas of arts namely: Theatre & dance, music, fine-arts and literature.’

3. Methodology

3.1 Survey Design

The survey is designed such that the sample selected covered the entire target population, the orphan and vulnerable children residing at the residential care centres in Tamil Nadu. Data collection methods like face-to-face interviews with a questionnaire were administered with every individual in an isolated location. The survey made use of structured interview, simple random sampling and Likert scaling. The questionnaire was developed with reference to UNICEF’s Tool Kit for Life Skills Education for Orphan and vulnerable Children in India and the guidance of eminent psychologists and child behaviour experts.

Intervention

The project through a combination of arts, media and enabling child participation is to develop a sense of self-importance and individuality, encourage self-expression and stimulate imagination in children through the arts. The arts can provide a meaningful thread to connect students with stories, songs, designs, expressions and identities from a range of backgrounds. It is important to highlight at this moment that to watch a child completely engaged in an arts experience is to recognise that the brain is on, driven by the aesthetic and emotional imperative to make meaning, to say something and to represent what matters. As evidenced in the research, there is a need to constantly work on:

Overcoming depression among children
Reducing disruptive behaviour among children
Developing: Empathy, positive thinking, inter-personal skills, communication skills, creative thinking, critical thinking, self motivation, assertiveness, decision making and self esteem
Developing artistic skills and talents in children

Exposing the children's talents to the media and the outside world thereby creating positive opinion.

3.9.1. Data Collection and Analysis

There are 19 residential care centres across Tamil Nadu with its total population of over 1000 children. 38 research interviewers were recruited for executing the Baseline survey. They were given intense training on the protocols to follow while conducting the interview to understand child behaviour. The researcher filled up the questionnaire based on the direct answers from the child as well as his/her observation. The children of the Children’s home go to School from Monday to Friday, so, the research was carried out during the weekends. After the implementation of intervention programme; arts training for children in Theater, Music, Fine arts and literature; for 3 months now, a qualitative feedback study was conducted among the trainers and the children with the help of questionnaire and personal interview.

4. Key findings

Before under-going the arts-based like skills training programme:

More than 65% of the children suffered with deficiency in positive thinking and they showed clear signs of habitual complaining, blaming and disconsolate pessimism.
Only a scant 2.3% of the children have good communication skills concerning basic articulation, listening and expression.
50.8 % of the children displayed ineffective interpersonal skills in terms of building and maintaining healthy peer relationships.
54.4% of the children have very low self-esteem and they have been found berating themselves and lacking in self-love.
55.6% of the children showed severe lack of empathy.
A huge 83.2% of the children are highly poor in coping with emotions showing an inability to regulate both positive and negative emotions.
52% of the children have very poor critical thinking skills that have implications for reasoning, making judgments, decisions, and problem solving.
More than 70% of the children opted for logical reasoning rather than creative reasoning in the creativity test.

After 3 months of intervention programme, the feedback study revealed that:

About 75% of the trainers were affirmative about the effectiveness of imparting lifeskills through arts education.
73.3 % of the children confirmed that they can feel a surge of change in their behaviour, after their involvement with the arts based activities.
50% of the children found their experience with arts helpful in overcoming depression.

Out of all the life skills, there was realization of immediate improvement in Communication skills, Creative thinking skills, Positive thinking skills and Empathy.

Apart from the regular weekend training programmes, several arts based life skills workshops are being held for the children. The qualitative feedback revealed that the children participating in such short term interventions immediately exhibit elevated self esteem levels. Children who were given opportunities to perform in front of their peers as well as other open audience, showed remarkable improvement in levels of self confidence, focus and motivation. Children of the late adolescent age group naturally assumed responsibilities and showed fine leadership qualities. In the absence of trainers, they conducted rehearsals for their own peers. It also displayed children foregoing unnecessary inhibitions and stepping forward to build and maintain healthy relationships with inspiring intervenors.

The arts-based life skills training programme is an on-going process and focuses on making arts, an important part of their day-to-day life. Since behavioural change is a change in lifestyle rather than an occasional exercise in self-control needs and rehabilitation is a course of looking forward to a continuous developmental change that involve fairly gradual and predictable progress toward adult characteristics, the arts-based intervention will also be a continuous process.
5. Conclusion

A profound review of literature emphasized the importance of life skills in orphaned and vulnerable children. UNICEF, UNESCO and WHO list the ten core life skills strategies and techniques as: problem solving, critical thinking, effective communication skills, decision-making, creative thinking, interpersonal relationship skills, self awareness building skills, empathy, and coping with stress and emotions. An in-depth study revealed that these children across Tamil nadu lack the “collective efficacy” required for a socially-respectable life.

The study suggests various links between arts and life skills. It was found that music is associated with spatial reasoning and the ability to plan while drama shows consistent effects on component skills such as character building, reading and writing skills, and interpersonal skills such as dealing with conflict. Dance contributes to increased self-confidence, persistence, social tolerance, and appreciation of individual and group social development. It also indicates that fine arts programs reduce delinquent behavior, improve self-esteem and have positive effects on learning processes. Overall, the effect of art programs is highly recommended for the development of cognitive, social, and personal competencies.

In addition, the study identified that the trainer is the main actor providing the atmosphere of the lesson which is of great impact. An exploration of their cultural background and the circumstances which made them the persons they are at the actual point in time should be considered. It was also identified that Multi-age grouping provides more natural environment and that non-graded groups are more effective than graded ones.

To conclude, increased opportunities for children, to express, positively displays, improvement in day-to-day habits, while on the long run, creates a changed perspective of their immediate society.

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