

Imagined Playgrounds: Creative Processes in Psychosocial Intervention

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Good afternoon! My name is Cris Anthony C. Gonzales. I am a senior artist-member of the Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA). I will be sharing to you a paper entitled Imagined Playgrounds: Creative Processes in Psychosocial Intervention. I hope by sharing an experience on working with disenfranchised children in the Philippines may inspire you in various ways.

Developing a Culture-based Pedagogy

PETA has developed a culture-based pedagogy to discover one's creative potentials and collective expression towards empowerment and social transformation. In the 70s, PETA gave birth to the **Integrated Theater Arts** approach where it puts theater as a space for ideas, the arts as a medium for unleashing of the individual's creativity, and as a potent vehicle to strengthen cultural identity.

In this approach, the art forms are introduced in an integrated manner weaving in their common elements and organizational principles to communicate a message/idea. Here the elements of the arts and the different art forms are discovered, explored and utilized to create collectively devised integrated showcases, theater projects and productions. The integration of arts is used to stimulate the vast reservoir of under-utilized creative energies among the participants and tap their inner resources to help them give form and expression to their inner selves. The workshop is not meant to make professional artists and performers out of the participants but rather to help them grow into creative persons no matter who they are, where they come from, or whatever their occupation and status in life are. In this manner, theater is used in the development of human resources and creative potentials, truly giving it an educational function.

PETA believes that the more artistic and varied the stimuli people were given to unleash their talents, the greater the probability that they would be empowered to become imaginative and confident to give vent to their inner voice

Through the years, PETA has proven the effectiveness of this pedagogy in partnership with different sectors – children, students, women, workers, social activists, marginalized sectors and many more. It has shown the value of art in freeing individual steeped in a culture of silence to realize their creative potentials and in the process make them **release, explore, aware, select, master** and **apply** these potentials for growth. Indeed, PETA has been successful in utilizing the creative process, and this methodology becomes an alternative tool for education and issue advocacy.

In most recent years, PETA's pedagogy has been transformed to suit the purposes of academic and social researches. The art and culture-based approaches have been utilized in many studies in finding the voice and dreams of different marginalized sectors. For one, the researches on disenfranchised children – involving children from indigenous communities, child soldiers, children in conflict with the law, sexually abused children, child labors and street dwellers – transformed the formal tedious focused group discussions and typical research interviews into virtual play spaces. **The room became an imagined playground.** The art processes give them confidence and expressions to share their trauma and provided them a safe space to confront their critical issues of betrayal, powerlessness, destructiveness, fragmentation, stigmatization and self-blame. It creates playgrounds in seemingly impossible environment – if not playgrounds in physical spaces, then those that grow out of the imagination.

Creative Processes in Psychosocial Intervention

In October 2006, I was involved in a research commissioned by UNICEF-Manila and the Council for the Welfare of Children through the Psychosocial Support and Children's Rights Resource Center (PST CRRC). The study looked into the risk and protective factors related to Child Pornography and possible advocacy strategies against pornographic victimization.

Background of the project

According to the research, except for the occasional sensational stories in newspaper, television and the radio about children being victimized, CHILD PORNOGRAPHY remained and still largely remains an unfamiliar issue to Filipinos. People's lack of knowledge on the issue does not mean the absence of the problem in the country. Many studies confirm that child pornography has been a real and concrete problem that Filipino children face way back in the 1970s.

The studies identified different macro variables such as poverty, sex tourism, the internet, prostitution and other similar variables as possible factors contributed to children's vulnerability to pornography. Studies point out that child pornography is not a local problem but a part of a larger transnational problem involving a network of pornographers all over the world. Operations of pornographic rings are held in developing countries where laws against child pornography are either lax or non-existent. It was also reported that tourists go to Southeast Asia to engage in child sex or to produce pornographic images of children. These people prefer Southeast Asian countries due to the absence of strict law and law enforcement practices, and the accessibility of children from poor communities.

This is not to say that only foreigners victimize children, Filipinos – including Filipino children – have also been found to victimize children in pornography.

The growth of the child pornography industry has been aided by the interplay of macro factors. Unfortunately, personal disposition, behaviors, knowledge and practices of individuals also worsen children's susceptibility to victimization in pornography. The previous studies suggested that the lack of knowledge of people may be contributing largely to the victimization of children. Potentially, it increases the risk of children in becoming victims since the lack of knowledge could be translated to risky behaviors or irresponsible attitudes toward child pornography.

Hence, the research conducted in 2006 aims to understand how people's predispositions and behaviors could contribute to children's victimization in pornography. The study also aims to surface protective factors that may veer children away from victimization, recommend appropriate programs to protect the children from becoming preys of pornography.

Methodology of the Research

To better understand the knowledge, attitudes and behavior of adults and children that may possibly predispose children to victimization, the researcher used qualitative method. Focused group discussion was employed to cover numerous respondents at any given time. The method allows the respondents to share their experiences, validate their own answers based on the sharing of other respondents – providing richer data and more insightful answers from them.

The researcher asked me to facilitate the focus group discussions in various highly urbanized communities and rural areas in the Philippines. I was asked to conduct the session for three hours for various groups: children in prostitution, in-school youth, out-of-school youth and parents. Then I was given a facilitator guide with appropriate questions for the FGD participants. The guide included general questions to open the discussion and for the participants to reveal common perception and attitudes. Specific questions were also designed to reveal key information and show the feelings and attitudes of participants. In keeping with the child-centered focus of the research organization, the researcher asked me to employ creative methodologies and activities in the focus group discussions.

Clearly, the data gathering of the research is really geared towards Child Pornography. But being a child right advocate, my instinct steps in and guided me to pursue more than just collecting data and narratives from the participants. I wanted a transformative and empowering experience for the respondents – both children and parents.

Creating the Imagined Playground

So armed with creativity, theater know-how and passion for children's rights, I accepted the task and began designing the flow of the FGD session. I divided the three hour session into these topics:

- A. My Personal Symbol and the Paper Boat Journey – giving release exercises to overcome inhibitions usually in the form of group games and action songs – setting the mood for play, spontaneity and safety; establishing trust through personal symbols and group ritual – an imagined journey towards enlightenment and shared triumph
- B. My Rights and the Child Paper Cutouts – defining who is the child according to UN Convention on the Rights of a Child; identifying the four major cluster of children rights; cutouts represent the Filipino child in-crisis
- C. Discussion of Power and the String Puppet – analyzing power relationship and the manipulation of children through the game “puppet doll” or string puppet; a priming exercise toward discussing the concept of CHILD PORNOGRAPHY
- D. Defining Child Pornography and the Narratives of the Community – definition of Child Pornography from participants’ stories, experiences and contexts; a venue for dialogue to give voice to the disenfranchised children; contextualizing the issue and analyzing the push-pull factors of Child Pornography
- E. Consultation using the Three-Picture Frame – it aims to examine closely the children’s often harsh realities characterized by poverty, marginalization, disenfranchisement, injustice and utter government and social neglect; utilizing Image Theater, the activity provides a venue to analyze predispositions and behaviors of people contributing to children’s victimization; it allows suggestions of possible intervention/ protective factors for protecting children from child pornography – from personal, immediate community and larger community
- F. Resiliency and Willing through Rappelling – a closing ritual where participants allow the paper cutouts to rappel to the paper boat (the vessel of hopes and dreams) and continue the journey towards better understanding, healing and positive action; the ritual allows the children (and the parents) to symbolically experience inclusion and shared aspiration where children are recognized as having the capacity to confront, deal with and overcome adversity; for the child, this means more than just surviving or coping, but more important is having the inner strength to pursue a life of dignity for his/herself and for the others; and for the rest of the participants – the ritual symbolically offer the warmth, safety and respect of the community in safeguarding the body, mind and dreams of Filipino children

With some modification along the way, especially facilitating the session involving children in prostitution which I trimmed some of the activities to suit their contexts, I earnestly followed the design to achieve consistency for the research data gathering.

The design of the focus group discussion attempted to explore the different arts – from Group Dynamics, Body Movement, Creative Drama, Creative Writing to Visual Arts and Community Ritual – providing an effective and creative way to process the dialogues with children and adults, who went home, moved, enlightened and empowered.

Conclusion

In conclusion, more than just collecting data for policy making or possible intervention, the researcher and I have journeyed with the participants as they rediscovered and created their visions of hope for themselves and others; providing an analytical lens to critically engage in personal healing and social transformation.

Indeed, helping them to find their inner voice and inner strength to overcome the culture of silence and cycle of violence. Their human spirits remain triumphant. It is manifested in their art, participation in games and songs, short dramatizations and group rituals that are symbolic of their dreams to positively alter their plight. I have seen, yet again, the power of art and creative activities in developing resiliency among children and young people, and forging partnership with the adults.

So let the **Imagined Playgrounds** flourish in the Philippines, Germany and the rest of the world. Thank you very much! Mabuhay!!!

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Reference:

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Trinidad, Arnie C. *Risk and Protective Factors Related to Child Pornography and Possible Advocacy Strategies Against Pornographic Victimization*. 1st draft. Quezon City: Psychosocial Support and Children's Rights Resource Center, 2006.

Images and Photographs:

1. PETA-Children's Theater Program
2. PETA-Metropolitan Teen Theater League
3. PETA Library and Archives
4. UNICEF-Manila