

# GOING BEYOND THE PERSONAL: PERCEPTIONS OF PARENTS OF INDIVIDUALS WITH AUTISM ABOUT EXPRESSIVE ARTS THERAPY

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## ABSTRACT

According to Enriquez (1994), the Father of Filipino Psychology, the need to contextualize psychology and its practice is of importance in order to genuinely meet the needs of the people it serves. Through the indigenized framework wrought from years of practice of expressive arts in the Philippines with the core value of “Kapwa” or a shared inner reality as a guiding principle, Being a collectivist people, Filipinos with disability find difficulty connecting to the web of relationships they have specifically the family. The study aimed to obtain the parent’s or the caregiver’s perceptions as to how the expressive arts have affected the person with autism and how it has also affected the dynamics of the family. The study found that other than creating motivation and a greater self-esteem in the student, it has also improved communication within the family. Expressive arts had created an avenue for understanding the family member with disability and create more empathy towards them. It has also brought about a sense of hopefulness in the family members regarding the future of these individuals. Thus, expressive arts had bridged the gap that the disability had created and has an integrative function for the individual, his/her family and the society.

## 1. Introduction

Being a lifelong, and immensely debilitating neurodevelopmental disorder, autism’s impact covers not only the child themselves, but extends to the parents and the family of the child (HB 6934, 2018) . Given that this condition is irreversible, the family’s burden starts off early when the child is diagnosed up until the adulthood. The burden of care coupled with the psychological impact of the disability will be carried on by the family. From the shock of the diagnosis, the grieving process, and going through the different interventions up to planning for the child’s future, parents and family members need to put in all the effort to see to it that the child has been cared for and secured (Paguio, 2021). Although the child’s condition poses as a burden, Foronda (1999) found that parents of children with ASD viewed their children as gifts of God, source of luck, source of pride, a challenge, and a part of their identity. Paguio (2021) further found that parents saw their child as a blessing and a catalyst for their personal development.

One of the symptoms that parents need to address is the issue of social functioning of the child. Children with autism typically manifest impairment in language and social communication (APA, 2013). If unmanaged, this inability may lead to outburst and temper tantrums especially in

cases where the child has a severe type of autism. One of the interventions, therapist and teachers turn to to help with this concern are the expressive arts.

According to Barnuevo (2018), In the Filipino context, involvement in artistic ventures are commonly devalued. He links this to poverty, the country's history and the attitude the general public has towards the arts. He continued by saying that Filipinos think of return of investment when engaging in any activity, and that the arts do not offer adequate financial returns. The view that art is merely for entertainment leads to viewing artistic activities as non-essential and a waste of money. This translates to the expressive arts and the therapeutic value it offers. This research looked into the perspectives of parents who engaged their children in expressive arts activities and aimed to serve as evidence against those who fail to see the value of the expressive arts as a vital tool in intervening for children with autism.

According to Schweizer, C., Knorth, E. & Screen, M. (2014) who looked into what art therapy interventions worked for children with autism, art therapy provides a flexible and safe space that may help the child develop a better self- image and improved communication skills. Other than communication, the sensory experiences from the expressive arts may have effects on the child's attention, self-regulation, and social functioning. This was supported by Lum, S.Y. (2017) who mentioned that the expressive arts helped children develop better coping skills improving the social and psychological wellbeing.

## **1.1 Objectives**

The study aimed to:

1. Describe the perception of parents on the expressive arts process and how it has affected their children.
2. Determine the parents' perception on how their children's involvement in the expressive arts affected the children's involvement in the families activities.

## **2. Methodology**

This is a case series qualitative study of 3 cases of children/adolescent/adult with autism. Data collection was done through open ended questionnaires, informal interviews and observations for at least a 3 month period. Thematic analysis was done from the interview transcripts, field notes and questionnaire responses. This was conducted in a private therapy center in Metro Manila, Philippines.

The expressive arts session start with a mindfulness exercise that helps the child to relax and transition into the activity. This is composed of guided imagery and breath work assisting the child to focus on their breath. This is followed by the art making process where the child is allowed to pursue any aexpressive art activity they wish. To help in this decision, the facilitator asked them to choose between two activities they prefer. The child may opt to be assisted in the art making process. All through out, the child's permission will be obtained for any assistance that they may need. Once the art making is done, processing was done through the use of pictures of emotions and asked how the child felt. a mindfulness exercise will be done to signify that the activity is over.

## **3. Results**

### **3.1 The Participants**

L

L is an 18 year old male diagnosed with autism at 3 years old. He goes to a public special education school in a self-contained classroom for 15 years and has been going to the expressive arts program for 3-4 years for management of fixation with dolls on a once a week basis. He also sees an Occupational therapist weekly. He was described to have had tantrums, fixations, hyperactivity and, poor social skills and considered non-verbal.

L's family is composed of four members: his parents and his older sister. His father is the VP for finance in a private university in Manila. He is an accountant by profession and holds a master's and doctorate degree. His mother is a stay at home mom who used to work as a finance officer. His sister is a college student and diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome with co-morbid major depression.

M

M is a 21 year old male with autism. He was diagnosed at the age of 3 years old. M is currently enrolled in a private learning center and is in a self-contained classroom. He has been attending the expressive arts program for 3 years with the researcher on a once a week basis. He is also enrolled in aqua therapy once a week. He was described to be quiet, serious, wants to be left alone, with auditory sensory issues, rigid and non verbal. He was also diagnosed with seizure disorder and maintained on anti- convulsants.

M belongs to a five-member nuclear family. His father is an engineer who works as an Overseas Foreign worker (OFW). His mother is an employee in a government-owned company. His elder brother is a successful owner of a start up business, and his youngest sister is a high school student.

E

E is a 10 year old girl diagnosed with autism at the age of one . She was also diagnosed with neurofibromatosis last year. She currently attends an inclusive class in a private school. She has been attending the expressive arts program for 2 years with the researcher on a once a week basis for communication and attention issues. She sees a speech therapist, an occupational therapist and has been in an ABA program. She is described to be hyperactive, rigid, was non verbal until the age of 7 years and had self injurious behaviors and throws tantrums.

Her mother is a single parent and works as a medical doctor. They live with her aunt and a nanny who has been taking care of E since 2013.

## **3.2 Themes**

There were two major themes identified from the interviews, questionnaires and observations. The first theme was Benefits of the expressive arts. This had three sub themes, namely: physical and behavioral, psychological, and interpersonal. The second theme was expressive arts experience, which had three subthemes; materials, structure and relationship.

### **3.2.1 Benefits of the Expressive Arts**

This theme pertained to the positive effects of the child's involvement in the expressive arts program as perceived by the parents. These revolved around the changes and developments the child manifested which the parents observed. The subtheme of physical and behavioral referred to observed relaxation of the child, improvement in the child's skills in art and a general improvement in the child's behaviors.

The student with autism tended to be more relaxed and calm when engaged in expressive arts activities. When participants began with their expressive arts sessions, two parents reported their children manifested anxiety but on the 4th session showed calm demeanor when in the session and even after. E's parent mentioned,

“Doing art has also helped her to use her excess energy and to occupy her...She is more cooperative and relaxed when you ask for her input.”

M's mother added that the relaxation was observed to last even up to the next session. She mentioned,

“M became more calmer than before as he always paints at home...I have observed during the sessions that my son is restless and at times, agitated when he comes to the sessions. After his aquatherapy, he passes by crying children and is disturbed by the noise. By the time he sits for his art sessions, he calms a bit and calms down more when he is engaged in the activity. I also noticed he has less seizures compared to before he started doing art.”

The participant's engagement in the expressive arts activities eventually lead to an improvement in their skills. The participants were reported to be more adept in using the materials and the process of creating art e.g. use of paints, markers, choosing colors to be used, pencil and brush grip. E's mother shared,

“E has improved her drawing skills. The lines, figures and her use of colors are more defined and specific.”

An improvement in the child's behaviors were also noted. The participants were reported and observed to manifest a decrease in disruptive behaviors such as tantrums, restlessness and aggression. The parents of L and M noted that after several expressive arts sessions,

“He has shown discipline and manifested less tantrums like hair pulling and hitting.”

“His hyperactivity was lessened when he did painting...He became more disciplined than before. He used to break all the frames in our house but now, he has stopped and even developed a liking of art pieces”

As for the benefits of the expressive arts on the interpersonal aspect of the child's development, these pertained to the child's ability to participate in the activities of the family and relate with others. The researcher had also observed improvements in the way they communicate, mostly non-verbal through holding touching, pointing and eye contact. The children were noticed to be more participative in the activities of the family and engages with them more. M's mother shared,

“He used to not participate in activities of the family so we usually do not bring him along. Now, when his brother hosts art exhibits, he goes with us, behaves appropriately and seem to appreciate the art. He looks at the art and seem to enjoy it.

The psychological benefits of the expressive arts were manifested by increased interest in the expressive arts activities, improved focus, improved self-efficacy and created a sense of hope among the parents.

The participants, in their experience of the expressive arts, developed an interest in engaging in it more. A desire for involvement and continuation of the activities was noted. According Csiksentmihalyi (2008), engagement and the desire for continuation are manifestations of motivation and flow. M's mother shared an experience they had with M that made them realize that he was interested in the arts.

“One time, when we went to a bookstore to buy some canvas for painting, we noticed that he was holding some of the canvas and handing it to us...After his aqua therapy sessions, he would rush to the third floor for his sessions... At home, he would continue to draw and color by himself when he feels like it which is everyday!...Before, M was not interested in art. He just prefers to watch his teacher do all the work but now, he likes painting so much that he engages without being urged to do so.”

Most of the participants were very inattentive and distractable at the beginning of the sessions. The participants were noted to have more ability to concentrate on one activity based on the interview and observations. Attention to tasks has increased and even transferred to other activities and contexts. E's mom noticed that she has become more focused, a concern they almost gave up on.

“E before would dabble into so many things all at once but now, we noticed that she has become more focused.”

Self-efficacy is defined as the child's belief that they can perform the expressive arts activities even after the sessions. The participants were noted to have initiative when engaging in expressive arts. Although not expressed verbally, no anxiety responses were noted when doing expressive arts activities. M's mom shared her observations,

“We also noticed M to be able to choose the colors he prefers for his art work. He also chooses the subject he wants to paint on his own...He paints on his own during his free time. He picks up art materials without being told to do so.”

Because the parents saw that their child is developing and engaging in the arts, it created in them a sense of hope for their child’s development and future. This describes the parents perception that the expressive arts has the potential to help them see a silver lining in their situation and see a better future for their children and their family. L’s mother shared,

“If L continues his involvement in art, it may help I’m become more independent and his art may become a source of livelihood for him in the future.”

### **3.2.2 Expressive Arts Process**

This theme describes the parents perception of how the process of the expressive arts activities helped their child develop and reap the benefits of this therapeutic modality.

The first subtheme is the materials used in the sessions. For the parents, the use of art materials facilitated expression of the person and evoked emotions accessed through the use of the different art media. L’s mother shared,

“L enjoys using the art materials especially the paint brush, different acrylic paints and canvas. Judging from his cheerful reaction, he is happy knowing that he can create a picture using the paint brush and color.”

Structure refers to the flow of activities and rules during the sessions that affords the person with autism the opportunity to explore him/herself through art with a feeling of safety. E’s mother described,

“E has learned to follow instructions better and rarely shows tantrums in during class.”

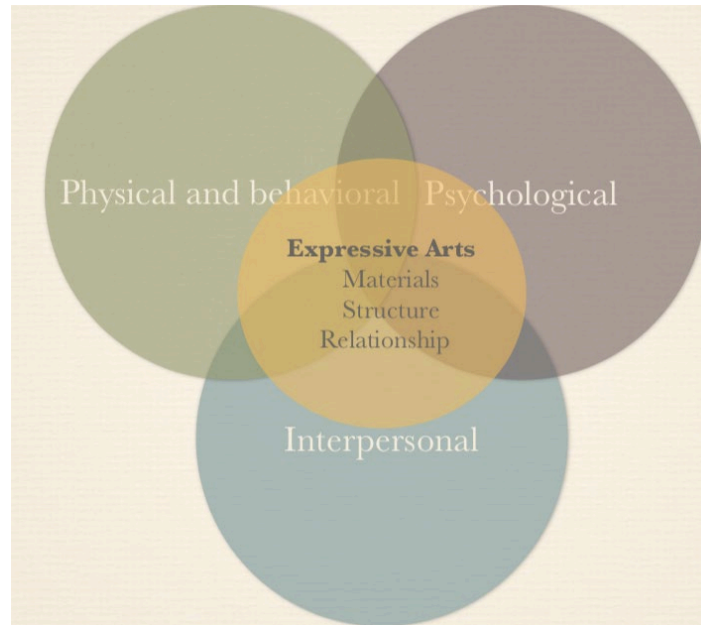
Lastly, the relationship pertains to to the trusting relationship the teacher has established. Through an accepting and consistent approach, this creates a feeling of safety among the students when they engage in the expressive arts. L’s parents described this as,

“L has gotten used to the teacher. He seems to feel accepted by the teacher through constant reminders of acceptance especially during meditation. He shows this by his calm and sometimes excited demeanor during the sessions.”

As a summary, parents view the elements of the expressive art therapy as a vital intervention and perceives it as beneficial to the child’s well being. This is illustrated in the figure below.

## Figure 1

*Framework of Expressive arts as an intervention for individuals with autism*



*Note: This figure 1 shows the benefits of the expressive arts as an intervention for individuals with autism and the beneficial elements of the expressive arts process.*

## 4. Conclusion

This paper concludes that parents of children with autism engaged in expressive arts activities see the benefits of the activities on their child's development, learning, and well-being. They see that the elements such as the materials, structure and the trusting and accepting relationship afforded by the expressive arts make the expressive arts a vital tool in intervening for individuals with autism. The parents also noted that the expressive arts also help the individual to express and engage with the external world more meaningfully, helping the child to feel more included in their environment.

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