

Notes of session:

The Use of Malay Dance in a Wisma Geylang Serai Project
By Azrin Abdul Rahim and Osman Abdul Hamid

This note is written by Melissa Quek, moderator of the session

The inspiration for the project

Mr Azrin was studying in a counselling and psychotherapy programme when this idea came to him. It started from the feeling that there was a need for Malay dance to be part of an intervention programme. He was interested to know whether Dancers not trained in Counselling and psychotherapy would be able to create such a programme as much of the Malay community has been seeing Malay dance as entertainment or as a way of ensuring cultural practices are still intact, rather than for its potential for social impact.

With sports psychology, the counsellors observe while the coaches work with the athletes. So Mr Azrin thought to bring in the experts to train in the dance and follow this with a group therapy session. A pitch to Wisma Geylang Serai (WGS) about empowering Malay Women to have the knowledge and skills to form their own support groups through these sessions. Through Malay dance and a psychoeducation programme

The project

Format: Last January 2022, over 10 weeks, at Wisma Geylang Serai 20 women aged 50-68 participated in this project. Each of the 10 sessions, lasted for approximately 2 Hours. The first half would be 45min of dance classes followed by a group counselling session with Mr Azrin for another 45min-1 hour. The dance instructors were experienced Malay dance choreographers Mr Osman and Mr Azmi Juhari.

Mr Osman had experience in community work under PA and was able to reach community centres with Malay dance. He had also been to hospices with performers to rejuvenate the patients and make them laugh and enjoy themselves more.

The project started with a briefing and questionnaire to check on the participants' well-being using an instrument to check Subjective well-being. There was an English version and a Bahasa version. This was the pre-test and at the end of the 10 weeks, there was a post-test as well. The limitations were in the terminology of the questionnaire. There was not a significant difference but there was a slight improvement. This would be proof for the client -WGS and shows that Malay dance can be used as an intervention tool in psychotherapy.

Participants: The participants were already interested in Zumba at WGS, there were 40-50 there and out of these 20 people agreed to join these sessions when they were informed that they would be learning Malay dance and joining group psychotherapy sessions. They were told that the aim was for them to want to create a support group that would meet once a month.

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Potential obstacles: They were worried about the gender balance but did not experience any resistance to the dance instructors and the gender issue did not become a problem. The participants were pleased to have master teachers teaching them. They had also seen Mr Osman dancing previously or their children were taught by Mr Osman. So there was already some respect and familiarity to create a relaxed environment. The resistance was more in the unwillingness to talk about personal matters. In the counselling people were initially shy to speak about the family. One participant actually showed that there was a lack of trust by intimating that what was shared there would not stay confidential. The first session was difficult with people being unwilling to share. There was a need to share stories and educate people. By the second session there were 1-2 people sharing and crying.

Why Dance

In Singapore it seems that many therapists have felt Talk therapy is enough, however, there are clients who would not be as verbally articulate and being given a chance to express using movements provides an alternative outlet.

Overseas, there are many instances of how dance has been used in therapy. A lot of the research seems to have been practised with modern dance and creative movements. The big question was how can it be applied using Malay dance. When it came to a traditional form an experienced professional would be needed to guide the participants to be creative using traditional Malay dance vocabulary.

In this Project, the relationship between the dance instructor and the therapist highlights how the arts are used, with the support of Arts professionals, to enable people to express themselves and manage a variety of emotional/ social issues.

Why Malay Dance

It rekindles memories of how they used to be dancers in school. This was important because in the second half of the session, this allowed them to go more in-depth into their feelings. This would usually be something that is difficult for people to share in public or in big groups.

The dance practices helped the participants to open up by breaking past the first barrier, when they dance they make mistakes and tease each other. Mr Osman jokes with them and helps them to feel comfortable so that when they get to the second session it helps to break the ice and help them to open up more. As it progresses they are able to share with their families as well. They might previously have been doing Zumba but it seemed that Malay dance was welcomed as well.

Examples of strategies used in the dance classes

The main aim of the dance portion was to help participants to be expressive and to be relaxed so that they would be willing to share and speak. Mr Osman draws from familiar images of nature, he asks the participants to think about how the wind moves, and leaves hit from side to side. He has them swing their arms in the Lenggang and when they swing their arms he guides

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them on what shapes could appear. He deliberately makes a relaxed environment that is easy to relate to. A movement such as the combing of hair would be familiar to them and Mr Osman would then connect it to performance. Only from the second session would Mr Osman start to introduce the dance vocabulary.

Another Strategy he used was to put them with partners and later into larger groups so that everyone would learn to be responsible for each other. This also enabled him to identify the leaders among them and from there they are broken into groups to create their own short dances and perform them for each other. They could then give feedback. give short performances and then after that, Mr Azrin works with them.

They also used music that the participants and community would be familiar with. These would bring a sense of comfort, familiarity or nostalgia and would serve as an ice-breaker to go deeper into the discussions.

There was one specific session where Mr Osman worked on expressing feelings. The same movement but with different expressions. For example, asking them to recall the happiest moments in their lives, or the saddest moment in their lives and some shed tears there. Mr Osman would then bring them back into a safe space with breathing exercises and once there is a calm he energises them with the drums.

Moving Forward

The project emphasised that the working relationship between the therapist and the artist is also important. They should be able to work with each other. Mr Azrin and Mr Osman have been working together for many years in a different capacity in Era Dance Theatre, but they already have a proven working relationship.

Mr Azrin's desire is that more trained choreographers would be able to assist in mental health care, but the therapist would need to be open to it. The artists should have therapists to work with them in this work to be able to have a deeper and more lasting impact so that issues can be discussed and worked on. Why should the therapist work with a trained professional artist? One example was that once the artist- mr Osman is able to get the participants to a certain mood and level of receptivity the therapist is able to come in.

This is a small step to make a paradigm shift.
This is ongoing work.