
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Moulding Dreams, Painting Futures

Rockson Kofi Genfi¹, and Dorothy Akpene Amenuke²

^{1,2} Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Department of Painting and Sculpture, PMB, Kumasi, Ghana

Corresponding Author: Dorothy Akpene Amenuke, **E-mail:** daamenuke.art@knust.edu.gh

| ABSTRACT

Street children often face immense challenges, including social isolation, neglect, and lack of access to recreational opportunities. These hardships hinder their emotional and psychological growth, leaving them vulnerable to further exploitation. This study explores the impact of engaging street children in art activities specifically, colour work, and clay manipulation at Safe-Child Advocacy, Catholic Archdiocese of Kumasi in Roman Hill, Ghana. The goal was to introduce them to creative outlets that they had not previously experienced, fostering self-awareness and social connections. The study employed an arts-based research method to assess the psychological and social benefits of art engagement. Findings indicate that art activities offer a transformative experience for street children, promoting personal development and emotional well-being.

| KEYWORDS

Street children; emotional well-being; psychological growth; self-awareness; social connections; colour work; clay manipulation; arts-based research

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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Introduction

Street children are typically those who live and work on the streets, often without the care and support of a stable home (Child Restoration Outreach, 2024). They sleep in bad spaces such as under bridges or abandoned buildings (Figure 1), where they are exposed to constant dangers. To survive, they engage in menial jobs, including begging, labour, and carrying heavy loads (Figure 2) to generate a source of income. Their daily lives are shaped by extreme hardship, involving experiences of hunger, homelessness, physical abuse, and psychological trauma. These conditions stifle their emotional and psychological growth, making it difficult for them to develop healthy interpersonal relationships or to integrate into society (W.H.O, 2000). They also often lack access to creative outlets, which are essential for fostering emotional well-being (Wright, et al., 2008). As a result, they remain trapped in cycles of poverty and exploitation, disconnected from the resources that could help them lead fulfilling lives. To address these issues, this study explores the potential of art-based interventions as a means of enhancing the well-being of street children. Art activities, including colour work, and clay manipulation, offer an alternative form of self-expression that can bypass the emotional barriers created by trauma (Julien, 2022). Art enables individuals to express their inner thoughts and feelings safely and constructively, allowing for emotional release and the



Figure 1. Abandon building where some street children reside in Aboabo at Kumasi, Ghana. Photo credit Agyei Edmond Kwabena, 2024



Figure 2. Street children carrying heavy loads for money in Kumasi, Ghana.

building of self-awareness. It also fosters social connections, as group-based art activities can promote collaboration, communication, and mutual support among participants (Stuckey & Nobel, 2010).

The research employed an arts-based methodology, which focuses on understanding the effects of artistic expression on participants through observation and analysis of their engagement in the art activities. This approach was particularly relevant for

working with street children, as it provided a non-verbal and accessible way to assess their emotional responses and social interactions. The study involved a series of art sessions at Safe-Child Advocacy, Catholic Archdiocese of Kumasi, where street children were introduced to various forms of artistic expression to foster self-awareness and social connections.

2. Review of Related Literature

Causes of streetism

The phenomenon of street children is the result of a complex interplay of socio-economic factors. Several studies have identified poverty as a leading cause of streetism. According to Shitindi (2023), extreme poverty often forces people to leave their homes in search of better opportunities, including work and food. Families living in slums or rural areas may lack basic resources, which pushes their children into situations where they fend for themselves on the streets. Another significant factor is family dysfunction, which includes domestic violence, neglect, and abuse. In many cases, children run away from homes where they suffer physical or emotional abuse (Capo-Chichi & Agboadannon, 2015). In some cultures, children are seen as economic assets, and when they are unable to contribute due to illness, they are discarded or abandoned. Moreover, war, displacement, and migration have emerged as major contributions to the rising number of street children. According to research by Hassen (2019), many street children in conflict zones are displaced by war, and forced to leave their homes to avoid danger. Others end up on the streets after migrating from rural areas in search of better economic opportunities in urban areas. These children often lack the necessary support systems, education, and skills to integrate into city life which leads them to various issues such as trauma, abuse, isolation, depression, anxiety and so on.

Trauma and Abuse

The most significant psychological impact of street life on street children is the trauma they endure. They often experience high levels of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. A study by Taib (2022) found that a high percentage of street children report experiencing violence on the streets. The emotional consequences of such abuse are profound, leading to conditions like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression (Netshiombo, 2015).

Attachment and Bonding issues

Disruption of attachment is also an emotional consequence for street children. Attachment theory, as outlined by Bowlby, suggests that children who experience inconsistent or absent caregiving in early childhood are at risk for emotional and relational difficulties later in life (Main, 2023). Street children, who often lack stable caregivers may have difficulty forming secure attachments, which in turn can lead to emotional detachment and difficulties in forming meaningful relationships in adulthood. They may also suffer from emotional neglect, leading to a lack of trust in caregivers or society in general.

Depression and Anxiety

Depression and anxiety are common psychological issues faced by street children. A study conducted by Taib and Ahmad (2015) shows that street children are more likely to suffer from emotional disorders such as depression and anxiety due to constant exposure to harsh living conditions, uncertainty, and stress. Many street children face the daily pressure of survival, which can trigger feelings of hopelessness, isolation, and despair. Additionally, chronic stress and exposure to traumatic events can impair the development of emotional regulation and coping skills. The absence of supportive relationships further worsens feelings of loneliness. This emotional turmoil is often compounded by the societal stigma faced by street children, which can reinforce negative self-concepts and perpetuate feelings of inadequacy (Worku, et al., 2019).

Inventions and support systems for street children

Given the severe emotional and psychological challenges faced by street children, various interventions have been introduced globally to address their needs. Many organizations focus on rescuing street children from the streets and providing safe shelters, healthcare, and psychological counseling. For instance, Casa Alianza in Latin America integrates rehabilitation with educational and vocational training, aiming for street children to reintegrate into society (Kraft, 2001). Save the Children also works globally to not only provide direct services but also engage in lobbying for street children's rights and creating friendly legal frameworks (Save the Children, 2016). Recognizing that not all street children can or will leave the streets immediately, organizations like Médecins Sans Frontières focus on reducing harm through health services, legal assistance, and outreach programs targeting substance abuse and exploitation (Burns, 2024). Efforts to reunite street children with their families, as practiced by Retrak, have been shown to reduce the number of street children (Retrak, 2013). Safe-Child Advocacy, Catholic Archdiocese of Kumasi in Roman Hill, Ghana, protects street children by ensuring their rights, influencing policy, and creating safe environments (Prempeh, A., 2024, personal communication). They support access to education by covering school fees and

materials (Deh, 2018). Additionally, they run a residential training center where street children learn vocational skills like painting, sewing, and hairdressing, helping them build a better future.

Painting as a medium for self-awareness

Painting serves as a tool for self-discovery and emotional expression, particularly for marginalized populations such as street children. Engaging in painting allows individuals to externalize their thoughts, emotions, and experiences in visual form, often revealing aspects of their inner selves that they may not have been able to articulate verbally (Chakravorty, 2023). This process fosters self-awareness by encouraging introspection and emotional processing. For street children, whose lives are often marked by instability and trauma, painting provides a flexible medium through which they can explore their identities. According to Shotwell (2023) creating visual art allows individuals to make sense of their experiences and a greater understanding of their emotions. In a study by Waluyanto, et al. (2020), participants engaged in painting activities at Save Street Child in Surabaya, Indonesia reported increased self-awareness and emotional clarity, as the act of painting helped them recognize and validate their feelings (Figure 3). Moreover, painting encourages autonomy and decision-making, which are crucial in building self-awareness. Selecting colours, themes, and compositions requires an individual to make choices that reflect their inner thoughts and perspectives (Hatami, et al., 2016). This is particularly beneficial for street children, who may have experienced environments where their voices were disregarded or suppressed. By giving them control over their creative process, painting fosters a sense of personal agency and self-recognition, contributing to their personal growth.



Figure 3. Some of the paintings done by street children at Save Street Child art activities in Surabaya, Indonesia (Waluyanto et al., 2020)

Painting in building social connections

Beyond personal growth, painting also fosters social connections by creating a shared space for collaboration and mutual expression. Group-based painting activities encourage interaction, communication, and the development of interpersonal skills, all of which are essential for social integration (Smith, 2024). When street children engage in painting together, they often exchange ideas, offer feedback, and support one another's creative expressions. This interaction promotes a sense of belonging, counteracting the social isolation many of them experience. According to a study by Bublitz, et al. (2019), art-based interventions in marginalized communities resulted in increased social engagement and trust-building among participants. The collective nature of painting activity fosters teamwork, and empathy, as participants learn to appreciate different perspectives and artistic styles. Furthermore, painting activities within group settings create opportunities for mentorship and peer learning. According to Murphy (2012), intergenerational art programs facilitate knowledge transfer and social bonding between different age groups, enabling participants to benefit from the experiences and guidance of peers or instructors. This dynamic not only reinforces social skills but also nurtures a sense of responsibility and mutual respect within the group.

Clay manipulation as a tool for self-awareness

Clay manipulation provides a tangible and immersive experience form of self-expression that fosters self-awareness. The tactile nature of clay work engages multiple senses, making it an effective medium for emotional processing and introspection (Suputtitada, 2021). For street children, working with clay offers a hands-on approach to self-exploration. As they shape, mould, and sculpt, they externalize their inner experiences, often symbolizing emotions and memories through their creations. According to Okewu and Thavanesi (2025), the physical engagement required in clay work stimulates neural pathways associated

with emotional regulation and self-reflection. This is particularly beneficial for people with traumatic backgrounds, as it helps them process emotions in a non-verbal and non-threatening manner. Additionally, clay manipulation fosters patience and perseverance, skills essential for personal development. The process of manipulating, and reshaping clay mirrors the process of self-growth, reinforcing the idea that change and transformation are possible (Ling & Winlaw, 2024). Engaging in such activities can instill a sense of accomplishment and self-recognition, as street children witness their ability to create and modify tangible objects.

Clay manipulation in developing social bonds

Beyond fostering self-awareness, clay manipulation also plays a significant role in enhancing social interactions. Clay activities require collaboration, sharing of resources, and mutual assistance, promoting cooperative behaviours among participants (De Felice, et al., 2022). Street children often come from backgrounds where trust and social bonding are limited due to previous experiences of neglect and abuse. Clay work offers a safe and structured environment for them to engage with others, gradually building trust through shared creative experiences. Moreover, the tactile nature of clay can have a calming effect on participants. As people mould and shape clay, they often experience a sense of mindfulness, which helps reduce stress (Cody, 2023). This atmosphere of relaxation is conducive to building trust and strengthening relationships. When individuals feel comfortable and present, social bonds are often deepened (Martino, et al., 2017).

3. Methodology

Planning and setting up the space

The study explored how colour work and clay work could impact the psychological and emotional well-being of street children using arts-based research methods. The study took place at Safe-Child Advocacy, Catholic Archdiocese of Kumasi, located in Roman Hill, Ghana. This was an ideal location as it served as a safe space for street children, offering shelter and educational opportunities to help them heal and rehabilitate.

Before the art sessions began, a comfortable and welcoming environment was created for the participants. A spacious, tiled area was selected to ensure that the street children could work comfortably. In collaboration with the staff of Safe-Child Advocacy, the materials and seating arrangements were organized to encourage communication and interaction among participants. The art materials were placed centrally, making them easily accessible to all participants, which promoted a sense of community and minimized feelings of isolation.

Participant's demographics and engagement

Twenty-five participants took part in the art sessions. To ensure confidentiality and protect participants' identities, pseudonymous codes were assigned to each participant. Those who participated in the painting sessions were identified as Participants 1a, 1b, and so forth, while those involved in the clay work sessions were identified as Participants 2a, 2b, and so on. Fourteen participated in colour work, while eleven worked with clay. Interestingly, all participants who did the clay work also took part in the colour work. This flexibility allowed them to explore both creative outlets and fully engage in the process. The different forms of art provided them with various ways to express themselves and address emotional needs.

Selection of art Materials and tools

The materials and tools used were chosen carefully, keeping in mind that some of the participants had no prior experience in art. For the clay work, only clay and the participants' hands were required. For the colour work, a variety of materials were provided, including A4 paper, crayons, poster colours, watercolours, markers, brushes, coloured pencils, chalk, and oil pastels. These options provided a spectrum of choices, enabling participants to experiment with different mediums and techniques.

Structure and schedule of art sessions

Each art session lasted about two hours, giving the participants ample time to engage with the materials and the creative process without feeling rushed. The sessions alternated between colour work followed by clay work each week. This schedule helped balance both forms of art, allowing the participants to experience the benefits of each. The sessions happened once a week throughout six months and are structured into six key sessions.

In the first session, the colour materials were introduced and a brief demonstration of how to use them was provided. However, no specific instructions were given. The participants were encouraged to experiment freely and use whichever colours they preferred. Some of them drew familiar shapes, while others created abstract patterns and designs (Figure 4). The atmosphere

was calm, with participants working independently or engaging in quiet conversations about their work. Snacks and drinks were provided regularly to keep them energized and hydrated. These breaks gave them a chance to rest and socialize, and afterward, some of the participants returned to their work with fresh enthusiasm, while others enjoyed talking and laughing about each other's work.



A



B

Figure 4. A and B show some of the participants who drew regular shapes and abstract designs respectively. Photo credit Rockson Genfi

In the second session, the focus was shifted to clay work. Each participant was given a lump of clay and showed them how to knead it to make it soft and malleable to model. They were afterwards instructed to manipulate the clay with their hands with no rules, simply to shape the clay based on their thoughts, feelings, and imaginations. Some worked independently, while others formed teams up to help each other shape their pieces. There was a lot of joy as they experimented with the feel of the clay. Many of them made abstract shapes (Figure 5). A break scheduled during this session, which involved refreshments, and this pause gave participants a chance to relax and talk, helping them build stronger bonds.



Figure 5. Abstract shapes modelled by participants. *Photo credit Rockson Genfi*

During the third session, a special activity was introduced for the participants, during which a motivational movie was shown (Figure 6) titled *Like Stars on Earth*, which tells the story of a boy who was marginalized and illiterate, but through art, he eventually gained recognition and success. The movie inspired the participants, showing them that they too could achieve great things, no matter their struggles.



Figure 6. Engaging participants in a movie show at Safe-Child Advocacy, Catholic Archdiocese of Kumasi, Ghana. *Photo credit Rockson Genfi*

The fourth session brought us back to colour work. This time, the participants used the emotions and themes from the movie in their drawings. Some of them who had previously drawn abstract shapes, began to experiment with human figures or scenes (Figure 7), connecting their art to their own lives and the lessons they learned from the movie.

The fifth session returned to clay work. The participants become more confident in their clay work. Some continued to refine their earlier works by adding more clay, while others began to create new pieces inspired by their personal experiences from the previous session. The atmosphere was full of determination and creativity as the participants expressed their thoughts and emotions through the tactile medium of clay. A break was scheduled, giving them time to relax and return to their work.



Figure 7. C and D represent some drawings done by the participants in human figures and scenes respectively Photo credit Rockson Genfi

As the sixth and final session approached, the participants were excited to showcase their progress in both colour work and clay work. This last session was a celebration of everything they had achieved over the past six months. Each participant had the opportunity to display their artwork and share their reflections on the creative process. The atmosphere was filled with excitement and pride as the participants admired each other's work, celebrating the unique perspectives and talents that had developed throughout the session.

4. Discussion

Participant's engagement with painting revealed a significant capacity to externalize and process complex emotions. Initially, many participants, such as Participant 1a and Participant 1b, were hesitant, but as the sessions progressed, they began to experiment with colours and forms that conveyed a spectrum of feelings from joy depicted in bright hues to sorrow or frustration depicted in darker shades. Participant 1c's detailed drawing (Figure 8), for instance, captured a personal experience

that she might have struggled to articulate verbally. These findings resonate with Shotwell's (2023) assertion that visual art provides individuals with a non-verbal language through which they can process and communicate emotions.



Figure 8. Participant 1C's colour work drawing. *Photo credit Rockson Genfi*

Moreover, following the viewing of an inspirational film in one of the sessions, participants like Participants 1d and Participants 1e translated the movie's themes into their artwork (Figure 9), thereby bridging personal experiences with collective narratives. This process of translating internal emotional landscapes into visual forms not only increases self-awareness but also encourages autonomy and personal agency through deliberate choices in colour, composition, and subject matter.



E



F

Figure 9. E and F indicate drawings by Participant 1d and Participant 1e respectively, which was inspired by *Like Stars on Earth* movie. Photo credit Rockson Genfi

The tactile medium of clay emerged as another critical tool in promoting emotional processing and self-transformation. Participants such as Participant 2a, who initially struggled to shape the clay, gradually demonstrated increased patience and determination, producing increasingly detailed figures over time. The physical act of kneading, moulding, and reshaping clay mirrored the internal process of managing and transforming difficult emotions. This observation supports Suputtitada's (2021) findings that clay work can stimulate neural pathways linked to emotional regulation and self-reflection, offering a non-threatening mode for individuals to reclaim control over their narratives. In several instances, the tangible nature of clay allowed participants to symbolically address personal trauma. For example, Figure 10 shows Participant 2b creation of a model resembling a masculine sex organ has been interpreted as an effort to bring forward and reframe experiences of abuse, while Participant 2c's pots (Figure 11), may symbolize a longing for stability and care.



Figure 10. *Participant 2b's modelling of the male sex organ. Photo credit Rockson Genfi*



Figure 11. *Participant 2c's modelling of pots. Photo credit Rockson Genfi*

Other creative expressions, such as Participant 2d model of a telephone (Figure 11), highlighted her yearning for connection with the outside world, while Participant 2e clay depiction of a bowl with chips and tomato (Figure 12), reflected her everyday struggle for food.



Figure 11. *Participant 2d's model of a telephone* Photo credit Rockson Genfi



Figure 12. *Participant 2e's model of a bowl with chips and tomato.* Photo credit Rockson Genfi

Beyond individual therapeutic gains, both painting and clay activities significantly enhanced social interactions among participants. The group settings of the art sessions facilitated shared creative experiences, where participants could exchange ideas, provide constructive feedback, and gradually build trust with one another. During one clay session, for instance, Participant 2e and Participant 2f, who had minimal interaction initially, began to collaborate on a shared project. Similarly, the collective art-making environment post-film screening created spaces for mentorship and peer learning. These outcomes are in line with Bubnitz, et al. (2019) findings that art-based interventions in marginalized communities strengthen social engagement and trust, while Murphy (2012) highlights how intergenerational art programs can foster mentorship and communal learning.

Conclusions

This study highlights the transformative potential of art-based interventions in improving the emotional and psychological well-being of street children. Through flexible art sessions involving colour work and clay work, participants demonstrated increased self-awareness, emotional expression, and social connection. The non-verbal nature of artistic expression provided a safe and constructive means for processing complex emotions, enabling participants to externalize their thoughts and experiences in ways that traditional communication might not allow. Furthermore, the findings suggest that engaging in art not only fosters individual emotional growth but also strengthens social bonds among participants. The collaborative aspects of the sessions

encouraged peer support, trust-building, and a sense of community, which are crucial for individuals who have experienced social isolation. Participants who initially exhibited withdrawal and hesitation gradually became more open and expressive, both in their artwork and in their interactions with peers. This shift shows the potential of art as a tool for social reintegration, helping marginalized people form meaningful relationships and a sense of belonging. Additionally, the progression in participant's artistic skills and confidence throughout the sessions suggests that long-term involvement in art-based activities can lead to lasting emotional and psychological benefits.

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