



International Journal of Innovative Technologies in Social Science

e-ISSN: 2544-9435

Scholarly Publisher
RS Global Sp. z O.O.
ISNI: 0000 0004 8495 2390

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ARTICLE TITLE

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THE CONTEXT, PRACTICE, AND EVIDENCE

ARTICLE INFO

Said Aissaoui, Samia Djemai. (2024) The Role of Art Therapy in Schools: Understanding The Context, Practice, and Evidence. *International Journal of Innovative Technologies in Social Science*. 4(44). doi: 10.31435/ijitss.4(44).2024.3044

DOI

[https://doi.org/10.31435/ijitss.4\(44\).2024.3044](https://doi.org/10.31435/ijitss.4(44).2024.3044)

RECEIVED

26 October 2024

ACCEPTED

24 December 2024

PUBLISHED

30 December 2024

LICENSE



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THE ROLE OF ART THERAPY IN SCHOOLS: UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT, PRACTICE, AND EVIDENCE

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ABSTRACT

The role of art therapy in schools is investigated in this article, encompassing its background, techniques, and supporting evidence. This research, based on an initial review of scientific literature and prior studies, concentrates on the effects of art therapy in elementary schools, particularly in the context of global events like the pandemic that affect mental well-being. The results show the effectiveness of art therapy in treating a wide range of psychological and behavioral issues in children, including anxiety, depression, and ADHD. The presentation also highlights the role of art therapy in improving scholars' social and emotional skills and academic performance. The research recommends integrating art therapy programs into educational institutions as an essential part of mental health support systems.

KEYWORDS

Art Therapy, School Mental Health, Psychological Intervention, Children, Elementary Education

CITATION

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I. Introduction:

Art therapy is a therapeutic intervention that combines psychotherapy with art techniques, where art materials, the creative process and the art product are used as vehicles for self-exploration, self-expression, developing personal insights and promoting change.

Art therapy, for Case and Dalley, is something that: "involves the use of different art media through which a patient can express and work through the issues and concerns that have brought him or her into therapy. The therapist and client are in partnership in trying to understand the art process and product of the session. For many clients it is easier to relate to the therapist through the art object which, as a personal statement, provides a focus for discussion, analysis and self-evaluation. As it is concrete, it acts as a record of the therapeutic process that cannot be denied, erased or forgotten and offers possibilities for reflection in the future." (Case & Dalley, 2006, p01).

Art therapy, a scientifically proven alternative medicine, offers non-pharmacological treatments with clinical benefits. Extensive research demonstrates its ability to provide therapeutic interventions, alleviate disorders, and offer psychological resources that can even be considered preventative. According to researcher Hu and his team, from « ... a total of 413 literature were identified. After carefully reading full articles, we found that art therapy has been gradually and successfully used for patients with mental disorders with positive outcomes, mainly reducing suffering from mental symptoms. These disorders mainly include depression disorders and anxiety, cognitive impairment and dementias, Alzheimer's disease, schizophrenia, and autism.» (Hu & al, 2021).

Art therapy offers a two-pronged benefit, acting as a therapeutic outlet for patients to express themselves openly while also serving as a diagnostic tool that complements traditional assessments. This unique approach presents promising avenues for psychiatric and mental health treatment that warrant further investigation.

Focusing on children and schools in our research, we argue that the early stages of education are essential and delicate for everyone involved: children, parents, and educators. We're discussing psychological aspects, like mental states, body language, and other psychological and social conditions that are often linked to disorders.

This discussion requires examining the diverse viewpoints on the significance of art therapy within the school environment, emphasizing its practical and cognitive benefits.

We're questioning about the nature of art therapy? What is the reality of this practice in the educational school environment? What are its therapeutic possibilities?

To draw well-founded conclusions, a comprehensive and varied review of the literature is necessary, considering both epistemological and procedural aspects.

II. Methodology

The research methodology is grounded in existing literature and is embedded within a larger doctoral research project we are conducting.

The literature review encompassed a broad range of studies, including those published in various scientific databases without any time or publication restrictions. It also incorporated data from organizations and associations dedicated to research and therapeutic art practices.

We didn't apply specific categories to the review process because this work is exploratory. We want to examine the most relevant data available, and prepare for later stages of the thesis. This initial research is preliminary and not yet formalized.

Through this, our paper try to tracking and reviewing the most significant data and information regarding art therapy as a psychological intervention for children, with a specific focus on schoolchildren. And, presenting field data from organizations and psychologist in the field.

The project aims to track how children and teachers perceive the effectiveness of the treatment and intervention programs, particularly those utilizing art in education. Moreover, explain the difficulties that psychological practitioners face in various social and psychological settings.

III. Art therapy: understanding its theoretical framework and clinical practice

Art therapy in elementary schools has grown significantly in recent years, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic, which has been linked to a widespread decline in children's mental health globally. Over 1.5 billion children and youth worldwide have been impacted by school shutdowns in 200 nations.

"The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the largest disruption of education in history, having already had a near universal impact on learners and teachers around the world, from pre-primary to secondary schools, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions, universities, adult learning, and skills development establishments. By mid-April 2020, 94 per cent of learners worldwide were affected by the pandemic, representing 1.58 billion children and youth, from pre-primary to higher education, in 200 countries." (UN,2020, p05).

Schoolchildren have experienced a notable increase in anxiety and depression due to this situation. Russell Viner and his team, in a review of relevant studies, found that:

"27 studies concerning mental health identified considerable impacts across emotional, behavioral and restlessness/inattention problems; 18-60% of CYP scored above risk thresholds for distress, particularly anxiety and depressive symptoms. Two studies reported non-significant rises in suicide rates. Self-harm and psychiatric attendances were markedly reduced, indicating a rise in unmet mental health need. Child protection referrals fell 27-39%, with a halving of the expected number of referrals originating in schools". (Viner et al, 2021).

In response to these challenges, various scientific research shows how effective art therapy in elementary schools is in addressing a wide range of issues, including autism, classroom behavior issues, anxiety and separation disorders. McDonald, Holtum, and Drey, in their study on the emotional, mental, and social well-being of primary school children, found a significant shift in the attitudes of both children and teachers:

"We found that statistical analysis of the questionnaire scores mostly agreed with what the teachers and children said and that there was generally some positive change to the social, emotional and mental health difficulties the children had been experiencing. The teachers also let us know that some of the children still had residual problems. The children emphasized that making and thinking about art along with expressing, thinking and learning about thoughts and feelings had been particularly helpful. It was also important to the children that the sessions were fun." (McDonald, Holtum and Drey , 2019, p125).

In another study, McDonald and Holttum (2020) compared mixed methods approaches to classroom learning for children. They concluded that both art therapy and the control group achieved equivalent academic outcomes, meeting national standards. Positive benefits have been seen in class participation and relationships with teachers and peers. To enhance the program and explore its potential in diverse settings, more research is needed. This research should prioritize creating a safe, enjoyable space that encourages self-expression, introspection, and communication.

Diagnosed psychological problems also require interventions using art therapy techniques. The results of Deboys, Holttum, and Wright's 2017 study highlight the importance of engaging and child-centered art therapy interventions that are creative and accessible in supporting the emotional and social well-being of children.

In this regard, and as a reaction to the various psychological situations that require diagnosis and treatment, the topic of psychological intervention through "art" has emerged. The field of art therapy in schools is witnessing an increasing development in recent years, and according to various reviewed literatures, this therapeutic intervention is becoming increasingly important in light of the difficulties encountered by therapists and mental health practitioners regarding referrals to traditional psychotherapy. Issues related to the ability to take care of the large numbers that increase the waiting lists for psychological services in some societies, and the need to strengthen the role of schools in early psychological intervention, are for us one of the factors that call for the inclusion of art therapy and its various resources within the educational and scholarly life of the child from the family to school, especially in educational institutions.

Art therapy has significant therapeutic value in emotional, cognitive, and social areas. This is supported by a study by Judy Sutherland et al. (2010) which reviewed and presented the Art Therapy Connection (ATC) program in Chicago, Illinois. This year-long program targets students in grades 3 to 12 who are at risk of failing. The ATC program focuses on helping students in low-income areas cope with the mental health challenges they face due to daily threats. This program uses Adlerian art therapy to help students build a sense of community, work together, and support each other. As a result, a sense of belonging and confidence can be fostered through social attention, encouraging students to stay in school and achieve success. This suggested study provides an explanation of the program's goals, objectives, typical technical guidelines, and informal outcomes. (Sutherland, Waldman&Collins , 2010, p69).

Due to the (largely) non-verbal and indirect nature of the art therapy process, it is considered a particularly effective tool in pediatric therapy, as art is a natural, spontaneous and playful means of expression for children. According to a previous study by Waller (2006), art therapy:

« It will show how change occurs during the process of physical involvement with the materials; through the making of a significant art object; through sublimation of feelings into the images; and through communication with the therapist via the art object.» (Waller, 2006, p271)

Integrating art therapy into the educational system has a positive impact not only on the emotional sphere, but also on the academic performance of those affected. It has helped reduce ADHD symptoms, decrease dropout rates, improve academic achievement, and reduce behavioral issues. Ceramic programs, as example, are of great importance in developing the personality of children with ADHD, as they enhance their sense of artistic taste and develop their emotional side, as well as provide them with the opportunity to express their emotions and vent their psychological pressures, which enhances their self-confidence and sense of accomplishment. Engaging in ceramic molding offers benefits for children regardless of their skill level, as it fosters mental development and improves motor skills. This hands-on activity is captivating due to the direct interaction with the material and the observation of its changes during the molding process. (Abdel-Wahhab & Shaaban, 2017,p445).

Art therapy engages children through creative activities, using special drawings and colors to capture their attention and inspire their participation with the therapist. The child becomes immersed in the artwork, using it as a way to project their feelings and inner conflicts. This approach has been successful in helping children with ADHD manage their behavior, particularly with the rise in school workshops and homework. According to Elmahi:

«Therefore, a child with ADHD can be helped settle down into calmer behaviors, by using Art media to decrease his hyperactivity. The more in-school training workshops and homework, the further this type of therapy would prove itself to be more effective compared to the other treatments used to treat this category of children.» (Elmahi, 2022,p186)

We strongly believe that art therapy programs should be integrated into educational institutions as a core component of their mental health support systems. By incorporating art therapy, we can create parallel educational and recreational programs that address children's emotional needs, prepare them for potential psychological challenges, and equip them with the emotional and artistic tools they need to cope with trauma and mental health issues.

IV. General conclusion:

This review and presentation highlights the importance and effectiveness of art therapy in supporting the mental health of children, especially those who have dropped out of primary school. This effectiveness can be explained by what art provides as a means of non-verbal expression. For example, drawing and painting represent an alternative language for children who have difficulties expressing their feelings verbally. Engaging in artistic activities can also help develop emotional regulation skills. Art offers a safe environment for children to explore and manage complex emotions. These are just some of the significant points about the value of modern art therapy, as highlighted by psychologists and clinicians.

These results align with contemporary psychological theories highlighting the vital role art plays in children's emotional and social growth. This includes positive psychology perspectives, where art therapy seeks to create therapeutic methods focused on fostering hope, optimism, and self-reliance. This method not only aims to alleviate psychological distress and negative emotions but also seeks to enhance the overall quality of life for patients across different categories through innovative artistic programs (Hafez, 2022, p476).

In the context of social interaction, the importance of group art activities (school as a place of collective action/activity) in promoting positive communication between scholars, as joint artwork creates natural opportunities for cooperation and communication, which contributes to the development of social skills spontaneously and indirectly.

Based on these findings, a structured and well-planned integration of art therapy into the school system is essential. This includes setting aside specific time for art therapy, supplying necessary resources like rooms and tools, and training teachers, counselors, and even parents on how to use art therapeutically.

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