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## **THE USE OF ARTETHERAPY IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENTS PERSONALITY**

**ABSTRACT**

*This paper considers the use of art therapy as a means of improving behavioural and advisory work with children and young people. Art therapy is an appropriate treatment for patients with mental problems or health disabilities, but can also be used with normally functioning individuals to encourage abreaction and self-expression through picture based non-verbal and symbolic communication.*

*The authors explore art therapy as a creative activity, emphasizing its therapeutic and preventive potential and discussing its professional status in Slovakia. They look at the impact and effectiveness of a project run by Comenius University Philosophy Faculty aimed at students aged 23 to 26 called Developmental art therapy programme for adolescents – Personality development. The authors suggest that art therapy activities and exercises should be used in primary and secondary schools to exploit their therapeutic and preventive potential. Content-wise these could be adapted to the needs of different age groups to help young people resolve issues (family, relationships, attitudes and relationship to drugs, meaning of life, who am I, etc).*

**Key words:** *art therapy, creativity, philetic art, preventive education, developmental art therapy programme*

**1. Art therapy and developing creativity**

Pictures are among the first creative works children produce and the medium through which they experience their own ability to create. The discovery of pictures such as rock carvings and cave paintings is indicative of this human activity. The language of pictures is primordial and constitutes the earliest human language (Riedel, 2002).

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries people increasingly communicate via images, learn through images and recognize images. The bearer of information is no longer the word, but the image – a reproduction of the world. W. Benjamin (1999) explored the deeper, distant, cardinal roots of this transition. Art mediated through the filter of technical apparatus and presented to large groups, with their mutually controlled responses, teaches people habits and attitudes when in a state of uncontrolled enjoyment. Art of this nature draws fully on its potential, and Benjamin predicted the consequences: *an unfree crowd of unfree, unthinking people*. Back in the 1930s he revealed the cultural symbols we can distinguish today through observation. He foresaw the shift in emphasis from the unique to the mass, the preference for a copy over the original and the pressure to continually update as against tradition. He identified the shift away from what the viewer does and towards the work itself as well as the move towards the passive, receptive observer. Knowledge was transferred from the hands to the eyes, and the aim was to see, not experience. Hence illusion (created through reproductive technologies) took precedence over reality (Benjamin, 1999, in Gajdošová, 2012).

The mass communication of today is largely inactive and leads to greater passivity and ultimately to a paralysis of judgement. By contrast the performance of art stimulates awareness and requires visual focus. Art is in essence a language, but it is not a language that merely reiterates well-known concepts and conformist content. The performance of art directly forces us to recognize with far greater clarity all that is in our power. It reminds us that we too should pursue a noble purpose in life. In the present era art should have a much more universal impact, as a “miraculous antidote, *an impetus for freedom*, that focuses the attention and promotes thinking” (Vrtělová, 2007).

The main rationale behind the use of art in therapy is, according to Kyzour jr. (2012), to emotionally enrich an impaired relationship with reality. If we are to do justice to the language of art, we must recognize its enormous potential. As the bearer of symbolic function, it is capable of mediating contact between the base levels of the personality with the unconscious and thereby cultivate affective tension such that it does not impair the human desire for self-realization and an intensive relationship with another, but is the driving force behind it.

The ability to create meaningful art attracts respect and admiration. Yet it does not matter whether the participant has undergone artistic training or has never created anything outside school art classes. It does not matter whether they have a problem or just want to express themselves or discover themselves. Art can be perceived in different ways: it can be seen as a means of relaxation or of developing understanding and as a potential means of self-healing (Vrtělová, 2007).

Šupšáková et al. (2001) state that a substantial section of the population – including the young and old – has not been systematically taught to absorb the arts in all their various forms (art, music, drama). The message of a picture cannot simply be understood by casting an eye over it, but requires the soul as well. Art has great strength; evidence shows that it helps develop and strengthen the right side of the brain,

that is, the cells that support creativity, abstraction, fantasy, develop the ability to convey an image, and the imagination. *Through art children can effectively develop their creative abilities, critical thinking as well as tolerance and empathy.* In order to be able to “read” a work of art and understand it, children should be taught art during their early years and at primary school. The value of a work of art can only be fully discovered if the perceiver has a certain mental and emotional maturity, life experience and contact with the arts. We could begin by performing art ourselves and then introduce children into the art world, eliciting pleasant experiences, emotions, and helping them experience the joy of the arts and works of art. We can teach them to perceive and appreciate beauty.

Šupšáková et al. (2001) state that the same components found in the creative thinking processes are also to be found in art: 1. *heuristic* – problem solving, creative thinking, 2. *schematic* – basic thinking operations, system of thinking, logic, 3. *imaginative* – intuition, fantasy. Having creative courage is essential to achieving free artistic expression. This is reflected in the desire and energy to try out new approaches, to create fearlessly and freely and assess without worrying and without fearing assessment of oneself. Children are particularly sensitive to criticism of their artistic creations because their work depicts their experiences, ideas and emotions and so they feel it is extremely close to their own Self. Children are subjected to various tests, exams and marking processes from a young age, and through these they absorb the judgments and critical opinions of those around them. Unfortunately in the harsh light of being compared with others, their creativity begins to disappear.

## **2. New uses of art therapy**

The term art therapy is a collocation derived from two different languages: Latin *ars*, meaning art, and Greek *therapeía* indicating therapy or treatment. Art therapy is often considered an interdisciplinary field as it is close to both the world of art and the world of psychotherapy. It can help people with emotional problems visually express their deepest thoughts and feelings. Words cannot express with such sensitivity the true meaning or shade of meaning the patient wishes to convey. Patients are therefore encouraged to express their feelings through drawing and painting. Themes often emerge that patients were not consciously aware of because they were lodged deep in their subconscious. When this occurs through painting, drawing, modelling or other artistic techniques, it may become the first stage in the treatment process in which patients identify their problems and attempt to overcome them. Non-verbal communication may be one way of making contact with the patient at the start of therapy (Kořínková-Vindušková, 2001).

In art therapy art is used more as a means of personal expression within communication than as an attempt to achieve an aesthetically pleasing end product. This use of mediums of artistic expression became known as “art therapy” mainly because it was developed and expanded most in the field of mental health and particularly in institutions for the mentally ill. However, art and artistic creations are also suitable for

use with those who encounter serious problems or who simply want to better understand themselves and their inner life through art (Liebmannová, 2005).

In the narrow sense of the word art therapy means *treatment through art*, while in its broadest sense it refers to treatment through the arts, including music, poetry, prose, theatre, dance and art. Hanus (1987) defines art therapy as a special form of psychotherapy conducted through graphic art, painting and sculpture. According to J. Šicková-Fabrice (2002) art therapy is a set of artistic techniques and approaches where the aims include altering self-esteem, improving self-confidence and integrating the personality, giving the person the feeling of having a meaningful and fulfilled life. Art therapy is a discipline that has gradually moved away from psychotherapy; hence those who advocate art therapy are generally teachers, while psychologists tend to identify more with psychotherapy.

### **3. Therapeutic and preventive potential of art therapy**

The initial aim behind art therapy was to improve diagnoses of the mentally ill, and it was not until later that the therapeutic aspect became part of it. Through their art, patients are not only provided with opportunities to express various feelings and reveal the most intimate spheres of their internal life without aggression, but can also be treated through this medium. The act of creating art not only distracts people from their unhealthy thoughts but helps them develop new interests and a desire for life. Creating spontaneous pictures and objects (the main function of art therapy) is an act of mental cleansing. Art therapy not only enables the person to release stress through ventilation and thus avoid destructive behaviours, but it also relieves the patient's mental burden, albeit on a symbolical level. It sometimes changes the patient's view of the problem, reducing his or her anxiety and leading to the discovery of hitherto hidden connections. Art therapy is therefore a suitable treatment method for those with psychosis as well as for those with mental disabilities and emotional problems. It gives patients the opportunity to abreact and express themselves through alternative, symbolic and non-verbal language. This may lead to an improvement in their mental health. The aim of art therapy is to accommodate client differences and needs. Naturally the methods used with adults differ from those used with children, the elderly and the mentally disabled (Vrtělová, 2007).

But art therapy also has a substantial educational and preventive dimension to it. It can be seen as both education and training. It is in this sense that we have *philetic art* – a new discipline associated with art therapy and the art educationist J. Slavík. In this discipline “art” is taught “philetically”, that is, in an attempt to bring together the emotional, social and intellectual sides of development (Slavíková, Slavík, Eliášová, 2007). Art therapy is most frequently used in institutions in which the primary goal in working with mentally ill clients is to diagnose and treat the disease. It is found in day care centres, homes for the elderly, social care centres and other therapeutically oriented institutions. While philetic art is about *developing the child's or young person's personality in an educational setting and it is used as a means of learning and*

*developing social and communicative skills.* It is the application of art therapy in education.

Many experts (Dostálová, 2001, Slavík, 1999) consider the use of art therapy methods in educational practice to be *preventive education*. They see the purpose of introducing art therapy into education as one of cultivating the emotional value sphere of the child's inner world. Art therapy is intended to mediate pathways through life's difficult situations. Positive prevention is thought to be particularly effective in families that are unstable and where there is a lack of love, since it is in situations such as these that the art therapist may come to represent an important person in the children's social environment, helping them integrate their inner world and encourage healthy emotional development. Dalley also thinks that in such cases art therapy can improve the quality of the learning process. Slavík even suggests that in the future art therapy should have the same status in schools as do consultations with educational psychologists or school psychologists (in Michalidesová, 2008).

#### **4. Scope of art therapy**

M. Lhotová considers art therapy today to be interdisciplinary. It brings together and interlinks the goals of leisure time activities, education, treatment, psychotherapy and social work. At various levels it uses knowledge from the art sphere (art education, theory of creativity), education disciplines and a range of psychology areas. The overlapping nature of the subject indicate that art therapy could become a method for all the disciplines mentioned. The areas in which art therapy can be used are relatively wide, and there is a well-founded view that it is a specialism that could enrich some of the helping professions – medicine, psychology, social studies, special education, education and teaching (Kšajt, 2010).

If we look at the scope of art therapy, we can discern three basic circles in terms of client age: *art therapy with children and young adults, with adult clients and with the elderly*. Within these circles art therapy can be used with relatively healthy individuals (mentally and physically) in developmental, educational or preventive programmes or with disabled clients (mentally and physically). From this perspective the basic circles (disciplines) of art therapy can be distinguished thus:

**1. art therapy with children and young adults** – with normally functioning children and adults, children with learning difficulties, child oncology patients, children with mental disabilities, children with mental illnesses, behavioural difficulties, autism or physical disabilities, with children who have suffered sexual abuse, with rejected children and children from children's homes, and with children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds,

**2. art therapy with adult clients and the family** - family art therapy, crisis art therapy, art therapy with mentally ill individuals, the disabled, drug addicts and inmates,

**3. art therapy with the elderly** – art therapy for more mature people and the elderly, clients with dementia and elderly people with various impairments.

Each of these client groups has its own specific needs, and this will be reflected in the aims of the art therapy. Fully understanding the client's environment and needs as well as therapeutic potential and limits requires many years' experience working in that environment and with that client group as well as the appropriate education (e.g. art therapy with mentally ill children requires an education in psychiatry and psychology, working with children from children's homes requires teacher education combined with art therapy education, working with the elderly requires an education in social care and care etc.). Since the therapeutic use of art techniques requires both an education in psychology and experience of art, professional artists and art teachers with a teaching qualification and experience of working with children and young people can go on to become excellent art therapy teachers once they have undergone additional training.

In the United States art therapy is a postgraduate specialism requiring a Master's level qualification either in art therapy or in a related area and a prescribed number of qualifications obtained through additional study in art therapy subjects. In most education subjects prospective therapists are required to undergo psychotherapeutic training and additional training once they have obtained their qualifications. In Slovakia art therapy does not have a clearly defined professional status. Psychologists, artists, teachers, doctors, special teachers, therapeutic teachers and nurses work as art therapists. According to J. Šicková-Fabrici (2002) art therapy is an attractive and popular occupation that also appeals to the general population, and so it is important that rules and regulations are set out governing the work of art therapists. In Slovakia there are no specific higher education courses in art therapy. If an art therapist is not fully qualified in a subject that involves working with people – education, special and therapeutic education, psychology, medicine, rehabilitation or psychotherapy – then he or she is only authorized to perform art therapy work under the supervision of a specialist authorized in one of these areas.

### **5. Developmental art therapy programme for adolescents /Personality development**

The Philosophy Faculty at Comenius University in Bratislava runs an art therapy course for students on teacher education courses and other interested humanities students. The students range from 23 to 26 years of age, and the course groups generally contain between 10 to 25 students. Some have real artistic talent, but the majority have never undergone any art therapy training. They tend to form a relatively homogenous group who will go on to work as social teachers or behavioural advisers in schools or as educational and psychological consultants for children and young people. The techniques and exercises used in the programme involve exploring art mediums, working on self-awareness (e.g. self-portraits), family relations, pairwork, group pictures and interactive group games. The aim is *personality development*. The techniques and exercises have therefore been selected and arranged into a number of main topics according to the role they play in the development of the adolescent's personality.

Theoretically the programme is based on a humanistic approach, incorporating elements of psychoeducational methods aimed at personality development – *developing art skills and creativity, self-awareness and self-reflection, fostering communication skills, improving group cooperation, increasing motivation to overcome obstacles, focusing on the present and the future, and raising self-confidence*. The developmental programme for adolescents is divided into ten main stages and topics, incorporating various subject areas, techniques and exercises. The course has been designed to reflect the length of a semester and consists of 10 to 13 sessions, broken down into 4 x 45-minute blocks. The programme covers the following successive stages (Sejčová, 2015):

**1. *Where we come from and where we are going*** – In the introductory course session students state their course expectations and any previous experience of art before going on to discuss their attachments in life, the “place closest to their heart”, where they were born and spent most of their life, where their roots are and finally their ideal image of the island and environment in which they would like to live and fulfil their dreams.

**2. *Let’s get to know ourselves*** – the students introduce their personality, attempting to present themselves and make an “advert of themselves”. These topics provide them with the opportunity to understand who they are in all their uniqueness and gain the required dose of self-reflection.

**3. *Let’s be creative*** – During this stage students attempt to find and “open” the door to their creativity and enthusiasm for creating and learn to work together in pairs.

**4. *Self-awareness*** – Throughout this stage the students concentrate on exploring themselves by drawing their self-portrait and then obtaining feedback about themselves from the group.

**5. *My background in relationships*** – This topic is about the students exploring their place in the group and in their relationships. First of all the students consider the quality of their background, where they feel safe (and indeed whether they have a safe place) and gain an awareness of their relationships with the people around them.

**6. *Me and the group*** – During this topic the students learn to work together in groups while performing various tasks such as “creating a collage about the seasons”. Working in groups, they share the tasks and responsibility for the joint result and continue to explore art mediums (painting on canvas, etc.),

**7. *My life*** – This topic goes deeper into the clients’ lives and history, sometimes unearthing “scars” and negative experiences which the students have to work through and bravely confront. They explore their own life, the present and the future awaiting them, they look at and analyse their “life path” and all that has influenced it and continues to influence it. Each person has their own unique life history.

**8. *Colours and symbols in my life*** – During this topic the students discover the function of colours and the impact they have on their life. They learn to express their emotions using shapes and colours and assess the extent to which emotions affect their own behaviour. They explore their own life.

**9. My future** – During this topic the students leave their “colourful imaginations” behind, return to real life and attempt to define their future and life direction. They think about difficult and serious situations they have experienced and express what helped them overcome them. They articulate their plans and dreams.

**10. Course conclusion** – Here the students are presented with the opportunity to convey their impressions of the course, “what it gave them” and how it has enriched them. This session also serves as a means of obtaining an overall evaluation of the effect of the therapy and of improving the course structure.

The art techniques used on the course include: pencil and pastel drawing, collage, tempera, water colours, acrylic painting on canvas, clay and terracotta modelling, and jewellery and mask making. One example is the following group activity: **Joint group picture**. The instructions are: *Close your eyes and start doodling on the canvas using dark paint. Then look at it and see what's in it.* The artists can also turn the picture round if required (even upside down), and if they are happy with the way the picture is they can finish it off creatively. They paint the shapes and spaces that have emerged in different colours. They complete it by signing it and giving it a title. They express their feelings, whether they like the picture and what they were trying to express. Often a landscape will appear or contrasts – summer and winter, fire and water – or abstract symbols and lines. Frequently the artists themselves are surprised by the work. Painting without thinking and without preparation leads to spontaneity and courage. It is as if the picture has a life of its own and the artist was just responding to that. Some participants find a dynamism and courage within themselves that is not normally visible in their performance in the group.

There are groups that are rational and argue about what they have painted having thought through the whole conception behind the work. Some groups rely on intuition and let themselves be freely inspired by their emotions. This is how the first picture emerged, which its creators called *Untitled*. The question marks down the left seem to suggest it is saying nothing but its structure is formed of bold dynamic lines and hides tensions of some kind. Although the artists coloured in one part each, the picture forms a single compact whole.

The second picture, *Meadow Glossary*, is formed of intertwining circular lines that become increasingly smaller as they reach the edge. They intermingle to form a ball of coloured threads. The picture has a harmonic, balanced feel to it, reflecting the mutual bonds between the group and the good friends. There are no problems, raised voices or tensions. The girls called it meadow glossary on the basis that nature is fundamental to our lives. The picture is a mass of plants or knowledge on nature.

When creating the third picture, *Energy in Flames*, the artists began with a cluster of abstract lines from which a sea shell emerges in the foreground, while to the left in the distance you can see hills, fire, the sun and a butterfly. The picture is created out of symbolic lines and spirals or shells in the foreground and surrounded by dynamic dancing lines. It emits a kind of energy and movement. The impression is of a combination of the sea, sand, a hill fire or the rain that could extinguish it. Although it

is an abstract picture, it is composed of real things or symbols that create life. It is the artists' future pathway, full of desires and goals as yet unknown. They stated that they didn't know what awaited them, that once their studies are over many horizons will open up for them, but so too will obstacles and traps. How they deal with them, will depend on them...



At the end the students provide feedback on the art therapy course. The last student survey (N = 28) showed that art therapy strengthened the emotional experiences of the individual – it improved the participants' mood, made them feel better and more relaxed. These (relaxing, encouraging) effects perhaps represent the therapeutic side of art and art therapy. Some of the student responses were:

*"I always left the lesson in a good mood."*

*"I felt better, more relaxed and generally more comfortable. So yes, a positive*

*effect.”*

*“I thought more about some things, like the things I'd like to have, what I'd like to achieve...”*

They also stated that they had learnt something new and improved their art techniques, that it had been interesting and had awoken artistic feelings. They had thought more about the things they'd like to have and what they'd like to achieve. Some pointed out the positive aspects of working in a group and thereby bonding as a team. Some other student responses were:

*“Some of the techniques we were able to try out for the first time and so it was interesting from that perspective. I enjoyed painting on canvas (not easy for us to get hold of).”*

*“I enjoyed drawing the life line, people, the self-portrait, adding positive features to the portraits.”*

*“One positive thing was that we worked in groups as well and thereby bonded as a team.”*

*“I definitely developed an awareness of lots of things and had a nicer and more satisfying day.”*

### **CONCLUSION:**

The art therapy programme fulfilled these aims: to unleash creativity and fantasy, to relax and unwind, to develop art skills, self-awareness and self-reflection, to improve group cooperation and sociability, and to promote interest in art therapy. Creative work and the use of art therapy with adolescents can open up new experiences and emotions and enable progress in thinking and feeling. It may bring a new impetus and desire for life in people experiencing crisis, health issues and other destructive personal problems. The “children’s activities” of painting, drawing and modelling which we leave behind when we submerge ourselves in working life can challenge mature adults to improve their lives and further develop their personalities.

This kind of creative programme would be appropriate for secondary and primary schools as well as colleges, where use could be made of its therapeutic and preventive potential. The fact that the content can be adapted to the needs of different student groups, means it could help young people to solve any issues they have (in the family, with friends, as well as any relationship problems, the meaning of life etc.). It is, therefore, equally important that developmental work is undertaken with children and young people as well as with adults who do not show any apparent signs of developmental problems but who would nonetheless gain something in life from the art therapy programme – self-awareness, the unleashing of creativity and developing their unique personality.

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