

Visual Art as Therapeutic Intervention

Dr. Indu Bhardwaj

Assistant Professor, Guru Ramdas College, GGSIPU

Abstract

Aim of the research was to study the efficacy of the therapeutic potential of the visual arts in promoting the psychological well-being of emotionally disturbed children. Ten children were identified who were facing transient emotional problems and over one year, 24 thematic art activity sessions were held. Each child's drawings were interpreted and other art work was used for compilation of the individual case studies. It was concluded that process of art therapy in both individual and group modes were beneficial for all the participants. For most participants it was cathartic, was an exercise for self-disclosure and self understanding, for some it was a discovery of their latent potential for creativity and making art.

Introduction

I realised that many children studying in regular mainstream schools faced difficulties, challenges and emotional problems from time to time, but no real help was ever given to students to enable them to cope with them. By and large these children were left to their own resources to deal with their difficulties. It then struck me that most children enjoy drawing, painting, craft and dabbling with art material. Moreover, they are all used to engaging with art in some form or the other, since it occupies a legitimate space and status in the school curriculum. As a research arena, I thought, why not explore art-based intervention, which targets students' psychological well-being through a series of well thought-out and organised sessions and activities that could assume therapeutic proportions and value. The language of visual forms, expressed through drawing and painting, comes to the child more naturally and spontaneously than words. Words are a kind of 'imposed or learned skill' that characterise the world of adults. The degree of satisfaction that children derive from art is likely to find automatic reflection and manifestation in their personality.

Visual Art Therapy: Basic Features and Characteristics

Art Therapy is based on the assumption that visual symbols and images are the most accessible and natural forms of communication available to a human being to represent his/her experiences. It may be defined as a human service that uses art, media, images, the creative process and children's responses to the created products as reflections of their development, abilities, personality, interests and expressions of emotions. In the visual arts, therapy is based on the premise that by providing tools, knowledge of materials and opportunities to experiment with drawing and painting, children can get a forum for the expression of their inner subjective worlds. This would help in understanding them better, helping them and enriching their lives. The child's eye is always seeing, sensing and feeling the atmosphere around, and finds articulation either directly or symbolically in her/his art work.

Emotionally Disturbed Children

It was important to recognise that all children exhibit disturbing behaviour at some point of time or the other. They are not considered emotionally disturbed, unless the behaviour displayed by them is severe and long-lasting and inappropriate to their age. Occasional manifestations of disruptive behaviour,

naughtiness, defiance, aggression etc. which occur in schools, would not amount to emotional disturbance unless any of them become a persistent tendency which characterises the child.

Methodology

The main aim of this research was to study the efficacy of art therapy in the context of emotionally disturbed children in normal mainstream schools.

PHASE I – Identification of Participants

This phase dealt with identification of the participants. Since this was the most significant component of the study, three criteria were used for the purpose of identification. These included referrals made by teachers, my own detailed observations of children's behaviour in the school and classroom and analysis of the drawings made by them on a set of personal themes like their own selves and their homes, to see if there was any unusual depiction in them. Teachers were asked to identify children who, in their understanding, were emotionally disturbed and were also encouraged to elaborate on the specific behaviour shown by children that reflected their emotional disturbance. My own observations of these children helped me to corroborate those given by the teachers. Based on both sets of observations and a preliminary analysis of the few drawings made by these children, the sample of participants was identified.

PHASE II – Conduct of Art Therapy

This phase focused specifically on visualising, organising and conducting the art therapy sessions and observing the children in both the individual and group sessions. As part of this phase, children were also asked to describe their own art works, focusing on the personal meanings attached to the different symbols and colors that they had used. This information was recorded by the researchers.

An assessment of their abilities to create art work and analyze what their art reflects, on the identified psychological variables addressed by

the study, based on the interpretation guidelines followed by art therapists, was also done.

PHASE III - Gathering Feedback

This phase focused on identifying some of the visible indicators of change in children's behaviour, personality and performance, which could be attributed to the efficacy of art therapy. For this purpose, at the end of the art therapy intervention, a conscious effort was made to find out what specific changes had taken place in children's behaviour, their identity, their self-concept, and how they reviewed and understood themselves with respect to their experience of art therapy. Feedback was obtained from their own self-descriptions, from their teachers and from their parents, wherever they were willing and forthcoming in sharing their observations. Teachers and parents were asked to specifically highlight the changes which they perceived in their children, subsequent to the art sessions.

All these three phases of the research were operational on the basis of a set of well-defined, specific objectives which are presented below.

Objectives of the Study

- To identify the nature of emotional problems being faced by the participants.
- To facilitate them to use art as a means of self-expression.
- To enable them to externalize and express their strengths, feelings, experiences and world view through art.
- To know their social world, nature of interpersonal relationships and self through their art work.
- To understand the symbolic representations of their thoughts, feelings and perceptions as reflected in their art.
- To compare and analyze the nature of art work created by them during and after art therapy sessions.

- To identify changes in the behaviour and identity of the participants as reflected through their own feedback, views of teachers and parents and researcher's own observations after the completion of art therapy

Tools and Strategies Used for Art Therapy Sessions

Keeping in mind the range of possibilities of art activities that students who are early adolescents can engage in and the availability of time in the school time table, the total number of sessions in which the art therapy was conducted with the identified participants who were emotionally disturbed was twenty seven, spanning across one academic year. Three standardized tests – Draw-A-Person Test (DAP), House-Person-Tree Test (HPT) and Kinetic Family Drawing Test (KFD) were used. Themes of the other art activities in the art therapy sessions included:

Reconstructing Childhood Memories, life Line, I want to Say..., left Hand Drawing, decoration of geometrical patterns, draw an advertisement about yourself, media / medium, exploration ink blots, the miracle question, collage work, mask making, scribble chase, metaphorical perception of one's class fellows/ making a portrait of one's favorite peer, depict your wish and drawing what the art activities meant to them, depicting one's self image, portraying one's emotions or feelings through drawing, illustrating the problems of one's choice and perception of any one peer after art therapy sessions.

Through these tasks it was expected that the therapist would get a glimpse of the child's inner world, attitudes, and behavioural characteristics. Other tools and strategies used to gather information and feedback about participants were: teachers' observations, children's scholastic achievement data, and personal data sheet showing motor development, medical history, diet, social development and peer relationships, emotional development, family history and relationships,

academic history, personal progress narration sheet, researcher's observations and parental interview (whenever possible).

Presentation and Analysis of one Case Profile

The focus of art therapy was not only on deciphering the meaning of children's expressive work but also in comprehending the complexities of both the process and product in art making. Expecting children to make representational art was not imposed or tried. They were encouraged to come to this of their own volition.

Case Profile of Om: Personal Data Sheet

Om is a 12 year old girl. In her personal data sheet she recorded normal developmental milestones. Her health profile shows that she is anaemic and is prone to health problems, due to low immunity. She is averse to milk.

She belongs to a joint family. Within that, her own family unit consists of her parents, three sisters and two brothers. Her father is the economic provider of the family, but emotionally she is more attached to her mother. She is happy with her family life and likes to share confidential matters and experiences with her mother.

Her only fear in life is failing in examinations. She says that she has taken positive steps to deal with anaemia and so she is not worried about her health any longer. She likes her school, but complained of water scarcity. She wished that her school had been an all girls' school. She admires her Mathematics teacher, who is also her class teacher, very much for her personality and professionalism. She likes all school subjects with the exception of social science.

General Impression of Teachers

Her teachers described her as a talkative girl, who lacks self-confidence and depends on others for help. In their view, she is very diffident and always needs their support and approval. She is not able to find confidence in

herself. It was for these reasons that they referred her for art therapy.

My own observation about her is that her family is encouraging her towards studies, since they see this as an investment towards her future. She is, therefore, driven towards trying to perform well, but this is also a major source of anxiety for her. This leads to diffidence and lack of self-assurance and a general feeling of anxiety in her.

Parental Interview: When I met her mother, she explained the family dynamic to me, which she thought could account for OM's general feeling of anxiety and lack of self-confidence. She said that since they had to rear five children within limited economic means, they found it difficult to educate all of them. Her elder sister had been educated but she had failed in the class 10 board examination and was made to sit at home, since she and her husband felt that it was pointless spending money on someone who was so weak in studies. OM was thus seen as the next person with potential who should be encouraged in her education. Therefore, as a family, they decided to motivate and encourage her to study and are making all efforts to maximise a bright future for her. Her father, despite his limited means, is supporting her tuition expenses. Somewhere I felt that OM understood this family expectation and was eager to fulfil the expectation that her family had from her and was always anxious about this, which in turn made her seek affirmation and approval from others, especially her teachers.

Analysis of Art Work

From the very beginning OM took great interest in all the art tasks. She expressed delight at being part of the ten participants in the study and considered it a privilege. On the first theme, 'Myself' (see Figure 3.1), she has drawn a nicely coloured and neatly formed image of herself. All the body parts and features have been aptly and proportionately represented. She has dressed herself in a smart skirt and blouse. As per the interpretive norms

of art therapy, the image shows a positive self-image and a well-integrated personality. I observed all through that she is a courteous and well behaved girl.

On the KFD test, she drew the images of all her family members by name, in neat compartmentalised boxes (see Figure 3.2). Her mother, who in her view is the dominant person in the family, was drawn first. The image of her father has been placed in the centre of the page and is larger than all other images. She was probably trying to weave in his stature and importance. The compartmentalisation for depiction of different family members may symbolise the need for personal space. When I visited her house, I come to know that seven family members are living in a two-room set, and so this may be an expressed need. From the overall representation of the family, all members appear to be well-adjusted to each other.

Her creation on the HPT test (see Fig 3.3) the images of house, tree and person have been well-represented in scenery. The entire picture is neat and illustrative of a theme. It conveys a social message. She drew three children popping their heads out from the crown of the tree, telling the wood cutter, whom she has epitomised as the person not to sever the green lungs of the earth. This is how she put it herself. The landscape consisting of the green grass, mountains and a brightly-coloured sun depict the growing need for light, nature and the larger world. She thinks and feels for social and environmental issues. In her picture, the house, tree and person have been given equal weightage and have been interlinked thematically, showing that she gives all of them equal importance and is aware of their interdependence and importance in her life. When asked to make a drawing of the person she dislikes the most, she drew the image of one of her classmates Neha (see fig 3.4). She jokingly told me that she wanted the image that she had created, to be hung on the wall. Seeing my expression of disbelief, she immediately

made jagged lines on the picture to conceal her emotions towards her.

Her social concerns are very prominent. In the task requiring her to decorate a hand imprint, she created a beautiful, well-conceptualised poster showing her concern for the population explosion problem afflicting our country (Figure 3.5). The depiction in the poster affirms her mastery of visual observation and integration of visual units. Each small image within the poster has a significance and relevance to the larger issue of population explosion, showing that she understands the issue in its full significance and is sensitive to the nuances as well. The shading used in the caption has also been done in a manner to convey genuine concern. Thus, the art created by her shows a combination of conceptual clarity and creative potential clubbed together.

In Figure 3.6, where she has tried to express the problem of her life, she has depicted concern about her studies and the approaching examinations. Her younger brother is shown teasing her, like he is articulating her own wish which expresses the idea, “I wish we did not have to study. Life would have been tension free and much more enjoyable, then.” She has shown herself in deep concentration, sitting at her desk and reading a book. The picture shows that she has anxiety about the examination and an eagerness to fulfil the family expectation from her. At home, due to scarcity of space, she does not get a conducive environment for studies and so she has created an ideal ambiance for studies in her art representation, replete with book shelves and a study table.

On the ‘draw your wish task’, she drew two very neatly represented wishes (see Fig 3.6). One wish is her personal desire to be a doctor, which she has written with emphasis at the head of her drawing, and the other is a wish once again reflecting her social concern, where she has emphasised preserving nature, particularly desisting cutting down trees. This shows that her identity concerns are both personal and social in nature and include issues

of global concern with equal passion. Her images show her technical proficiency and a reflective and analytical thinking approach.

In creating a collage, which was the next art task, OM got very few pictures and leftover material to use. In spite of that, she has created a very eye-catching piece in which colour and little cuttings of paper have been combined to create a very attractive image (see Fig 3.7). This shows her creative abilities and resourcefulness. What she was trying to depict in the creation was not very clear in her mind and so she was not able to talk about it. Irrespective of that, what she has created has an aesthetic appeal of its own.

Her most memorable childhood memory, which she cherishes till date, is the celebration of her sixth birthday (see Fig. 3.8). The scene that she has depicted beautifully captures the happy moments shared by her parents and her brother on the occasion. There is a clear symmetry in the wall decorations as well. With the spontaneous switch to the more self-expressive style seen in Fig, 3.9, OM indicated her willingness to progress cautiously, in the direction that the therapist encouraged her to move in. Structured directives were provided so that she could focus and augment the material. In the scribble task, (see Fig 3.10) faces, animals and leaves have all been aesthetically interwoven into a creative composition.

Explaining the collage created by her, (see Fig 3.11), in which she has shown a teenaged girl in search of autonomy, which she said was a manifestation of her own wish to be a dancer and aspire for the sky. The image of the aeroplane has been woven in to depict this along with the image of the girl floating in the blue sky. Negative space is also utilised for portraying random ideas. Once again her artwork shows a beautiful synthesis of ideational representation and technical competence. Depicting her life experiences in the form of life line was a difficult task for her. She expressed that she is happy with life and

just wrote out some routine activities that make her happy as well as mentioning those that make her unhappy (Figure 3.12). They are neatly written-out in the picture. The happy activities included playing, going for a picnic, partying, having lunch and walking. These are all social activities showing that she likes to be with others.

OM's progress in response to encouragement in the self-expressive process was validated by the achromatic drawing that she created in the subsequent session. She chose sketching as a medium to communicate four types of feelings (see Fig 3.13). These were feelings of happiness, crying, sorrow and anger. Each of these emotions were expressed through an appropriate facial expression and the reasons which lead to manifestation of these emotions in her were also spelt out. This shows that she has good self-understanding and is able to own her feelings and emotions.

On the DAP test, OM, who has a need to see herself as a powerful and dominating person, has drawn a very large figure of a girl, with a facial expression of being constrained and somewhat helpless. The encapsulated figure, plus arms drawn smaller compared to the rest of the body may be indicative of her suppressed ego control, as per the interpretive norms. She has not drawn the entire figure and the facial features are also misleading. Therefore, not many inferences can be made. In the second drawing on the DAP, she has depicted a boy, devoid of a chin. This usually represents feelings of inadequacy in social situations. The boy's t-shirt displays graffiti, establishing that he is the best champion. This corroborates her need for recognition and high aspirations (see fig 3.14i and ii).

Figure 3.15 shows her depiction of her friend GK, metaphorically represented as a heart. She says that she has used a heart to personify her friend because she has a very good heart, is a very well-meaning girl and OM greatly values her friendship. She has also drawn the face of KM as the person whom she likes the most

among the boys of her class. Contrary to reality, she chose unusual colours to depict his eyes and hair (see fig 3.16). She seemed to have been guided by fantasy in making his eyes blue and his hair streaked. She was not able to offer any reasons for doing so.

In figure 3.17, OM's control over art media is significant. A smiling sun, notion of perspective and use of shading to depict depth, all show prominent logical perceptual development. Less control of texture usage is visible. I observed that she acquired the skill of creating spatial order in her depictions due to her growing interest in drawing.

Media exploration scratch task (see Fig 3.18), mask-making effort (see Fig 3.19), and sticking material to make a geometrical pattern (see Fig 3.19) show her stimulated imagination and developed aesthetic sense. They are beautifully conceived and decorated with a keen eye for aesthetic detail.

She considers GK, her best friend. She had noticed perceptible change in her after art therapy, in terms of improved peer relationships, which she has articulated in the picture created as a representation of changes observed in any one peer (see Fig 3.21). She tried several combinations of fabric pieces before settling for the final one. This picture also shows her special interest in the ornamental aspect of painting.

Her own experience of art therapy was expressed in the form of a narrative drawing (see fig. 3.22). Her drawing showed increased memory retrieval and organisational capacity to use art as narrative. For her, art therapy had been a valuable modality in enhancing her art expression i.e. drawing and music. Her interest in studies grew further. She has lauded my therapeutic role, symbolically. Each of the four pictures that she has used to provide feedback speak symbolically and through the dialogues infused in them. She has used this style as an exclusive vehicle for personal expression, creating very telling visual forms. She has

ended her picture with a declaration of love for the therapist.

Conclusion

Through the course of art therapy, OM's interest grew in the visual properties of her own work and those created by her peers, namely – composition, the elements of design and in the technical aspects of materials and processes. Later, she enjoyed the self-confidence that she could build by achieving competence. OM's response to both the use of art materials (crayons, poster color, pencils and paper) and the therapeutic relationship was positive. She discovered in the art process a new mode of communication that helped her establish good peer relationships, and it also helped her in expressing her feelings better. As her trust and comfort in the relationship grew, she began to take risks with self-exposure, bringing her concealed internal world out into the open. Her later work shows more self-representational products. As art therapy sessions progressed, OM was able to use the art material for communication of feelings that could be understood even without verbal exploration. Her pictures show organisation

and reflect her capacity for purposeful activity. Later she acquired the capacity of forming a clear mental image of what she wanted to express as well as the ability to execute it. Her teachers felt that she had improved in her self-confidence and was not so hesitant any more. She could also take some initiative on her own.

Overall conclusions

In a limited number of sessions, it was seen that drawing helped children to communicate relevant issues and problems quickly, thus expediting assessment and intervention. Art therapy shows positive changes and progress in visual and scholastic skills of children.

Implications of the Study

Art therapy can offer a valuable resource in the unearthing the expression needs of children in mainstream education. It would definitely benefit those children who have emotional or behavioural difficulties even if they are minor or transient in nature and also those children whose special needs cannot be met in the classroom. Satisfying the emotional needs of such children will positively affect their learning potential.

References

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Appendix



Fig. 3.1



Fig. 3.2



Fig. 3.3



Fig. 3.4



Fig. 3.5



Fig. 3.6



Fig. 3.7



Fig. 3.8



Fig. 3.9



Fig. 3.10



Fig. 3.11

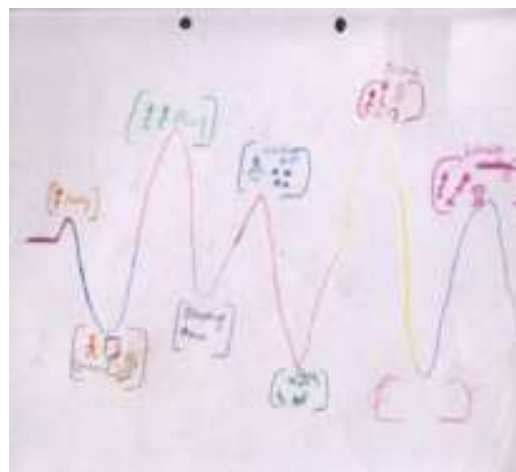


Fig. 3.12



Fig. 3.13



Fig. 3.14



Fig. 3.15



Fig. 3.16



Fig. 3.17



Fig. 3.18



Fig. 3.19



Fig. 3.20



Fig. 3.21



Fig. 3.22