



Art therapy in schools – The therapist's perspective



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ABSTRACT

The school system is currently one of the key frameworks in which emotional therapy is provided to children in need (French & Klein, 2012). Using the medium of art to provide therapy for children is well established. However, providing interpersonal and emotion led therapy within the context of the educational system faces various hurdles (Glassman & Prasad, 2013). The present study reports part of a larger research project designed which is examining issues involved in integrating art therapy into schools in Israel. The focus of this study is the perceptions of art therapists regarding the implementation of services within educational systems. The aim of the study is to help develop new theoretical conceptualizations and models relevant to therapeutic practice in the education system. The researchers interviewed 15 art therapists and used the CQR (Consensual Qualitative Rconsensual qualitative research) analysis method (Hill, 2012). The study covered four domains: 1. The advantages of practicing art therapy in the educational system as perceived by art therapists; 2. The difficulties encountered by art therapists in the educational system; 3. The tools and approaches implemented by schools to assist art therapists in their work; 4. The tools and approaches used by art therapists to fulfill their task in the educational setting. The findings indicate that the practice of art therapy within schools could be better facilitated by greater knowledge of art therapy within the education system, and greater recognition of the profession of art therapy through processes of state recognition.

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It is often claimed that school children have more emotional problems than in the past (Moriya, 2000; Weist, Rubin, Moore, Adelsheim, & Wrobel, 2007). According to Loesl (2010), the heavy baggage that school-aged children bring with them from their homes tends to be overlooked and avoided during school hours; hence the argument that the educational system needs to address their pupils' behavioral and emotional issues as well as their educational needs (Paternite, 2005; Randick & Dermer, 2013). When pupils feel good about themselves, they are free to focus on the learning process and their aspirations for the future (Isis, Bush, Siegel, & Ventura, 2010).

In the last few decades, the vast majority of children who undergo emotional therapy are offered this service within the educational sector (French & Klein, 2012). There are many benefits to emotional therapy within the school framework and there are many who believe that it is more efficient than therapy at

community mental health centers, in terms of accessibility and shorter waiting times (Hussey & Guo, 2003). However, the main advantage is the flow of information and mutual enrichment between therapists and school staff members (Moriya, 2000). The school setting is a meeting point of three central systems: the educational system, the personality of the child, and the child's family. In this context, one of the main determinants of the success or failure of the therapeutic process with children is the cooperation of their parents (Chethik, 2000).

The present study focuses on art therapy. For children, art is a medium for natural and spontaneous expression, which helps develop interpersonal and intrapersonal communication (Moriya, 2000). Artistic expression is a way to assess the feelings and perceptions of the child's inner world and to enable communication between this inner world and the outer world (French & Klein, 2012). Studies have found that art therapy in the school framework helps pupils resolve emotional problems (Gersch & Goncalves, 2006) and can assist children at risk and children with learning disabilities to adapt to the school system (Freilich & Shechtman, 2010; Spier, 2010). Today, art therapists are an integral part of the mental health team who are employed in the school system (Randick & Dermer, 2013).

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Despite its many advantages, therapy within the school system has unique characteristics that can influence the effectiveness of the therapy itself and may impede the work of the art therapist (Ringeisen, Henderson, & Hoagwood, 2003). 1. Among others, it is difficult to create an appropriate “setting” for therapy that enables privacy and confidentiality within the school system (Ofer-Yarom, 2007; Wengrower, 1998). 2. The school calendar is filled with holidays and activities that hinder the flow and continuity of therapy (Wengrower, 1998). In addition, therapy sessions are shorter to accommodate school lesson times (Moriya, 2000). 3. There are many factors that hinder the necessary interactions between the educational staff and the art therapist, such as the tension stemming from a sense of uneven distribution of workload, or unrealistic expectations from the educational staff for quick therapeutic results (Moriya, 2000; Wengrower, 1998).

These are just a handful of the many difficulties faced by art therapists in schools. They underscore the need to rethink and better align the profession to the needs of the client and the needs of the educational system’s philosophy (Karkou, 2010). Glassman & Prasad argued that: “In looking at the art therapy programs in schools around the world, it is evident that art therapists are challenged to meet the needs of children. . . . These challenges. . . appear to be universal” (2013, p. 128). To date, a number of operational work plans have been created for the integration of art therapists in the educational system (French & Klein, 2012; Moriya, 2000). Clearly this complex situation calls for specific research methods to better our understanding of the disadvantages as well as the advantages art therapists derive from working in schools. This study focused on the existing situation in Israel and assessed the perceptions of art therapists working in the school system to provide a timely snapshot of the current situation. Specifically it examined the perceptions of art therapists regarding the advantages of integrating art therapy into the school system, the difficulties they face, and their suggestions for improvement.

Method

This preliminary study collected information about the perceptions, experiences and attitudes of art therapists concerning their work in the educational system. This study is part of a larger research project that examines the perceptions of professionals in the educational system regarding the integration of art therapy in schools. The educational system is the largest employer of art therapists in Israel. Therapists work in special education and regular education. In both settings work is divided into individual sessions and group sessions depending on the specific needs of each setting. In the special education sector, most art therapists are employed directly by the schools. By contrast, in the regular education system art therapists in Israel are employed by Regional Support Centers that provide a range of supportive treatments for children with special needs. These centers embed therapists in schools, and provide them with supervision and training programs. The first and last authors of this article worked as art therapists for approximately ten years in the educational system in Israel and hence are highly familiar with the advantages and disadvantages of practicing art therapy in these settings.

The research method is based on the CQR (consensual qualitative research) that was first presented by Hill, Thompson, and Williams (1997). It draws on a number of qualitative approaches that tap the perceptions of individual participants and can also capture group level conclusions. This is achieved by working with multiple evaluators and reaching a consensus about core areas and different ideas (Hill et al., 2005; Hill, 2012). Hence the CQR generates descriptions that are clear and less biased. The CQR method is frequently used in the area of psychotherapy research

and counseling psychology in general (Daniels, Angleman, & Grinnan, 2015; Hill, Knox, & Hess, 2012; Ladislav, 2012).

Participants

This study was based on interviews with 15 full time art therapists who are employed by the Ministry of Education and work at various schools in different parts of Israel. All the participants were art therapists who had been employed by the Israeli Ministry of Education for 2–25 years ($M = 8.4$) and worked in 1–4 educational frameworks (see Table 1).

Tools

This study used a semi-structured interview approach based on the consensual qualitative research method (Hill et al., 2005). According to the CQR method, the protocol for the interview is detailed, semi-structured and involves a number of scripted questions, as well as a list of suggested probes to help the interviewees explore their experiences more deeply. The interview consisted of three parts and was based on an interview guide. In the first part, the participants introduce themselves, and talk about their education, the number of hours they work every week, their working conditions and the like. In the second part of the interview, the participants are asked about their personal relationship at work with the school staff, the physical working conditions and the nature of their relationships with clients’ parents. In addition, they are asked about their perceptions regarding art therapy in the educational system, such as advantages and difficulties. In the third part of the interview, participants are asked if they have ideas or possible solutions for the difficulties they mentioned.

Procedure

Participants were invited to participate in the study via email, using various art therapy mailing lists, or through contacts with directors and principals working in the education system. Following a telephone call explaining the nature of the study, a date was set for the interview with the art therapists who agreed to participate in the study. Each therapist was interviewed in a semi-structured manner that lasted between 1 and 2 h. The therapists all agreed to the use of the information in the interviews for research purposes and signed a consent form. The researchers guaranteed privacy. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social Welfare and Health Sciences at the University of Haifa, and by the Office of the Chief Scientist of the Israeli Ministry of Education.

Data analysis

In the first stage, and according to the consensual qualitative research method, three interviews were analyzed separately by three different evaluators. This served to gather multiple perspectives regarding the main issues in the interviews, the domains, and the core ideas in them. The next step was a consensus process during which the evaluators combined their ideas based on the meaning of the data. An external auditor examined the data to identify biases created during the consensus process. In the next stage, the remainder of the interviews was analyzed by the second writer of this article using the structure resulting from the consensus process. Additionally, a cross-analysis was conducted comparing the interviews (Hill et al., 2005). In the description of the findings, the phrase “all therapists” refers to the entire sample, the phrase “most therapists” refers to 12–14 participants, the phrase “some therapists” refers to 7–11 participants, and the phrase “a few of the therapists” refers to a group of 4–6 participants. Ideas in

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