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## Art therapy in elementary school counseling

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## Art therapy in elementary school counseling

### Abstract

People tend to be less guarded about expressing themselves through drawings than through speech. Therefore, drawings can offer glimpses into the ways individuals see themselves and their worlds (Silver, 1988). Children are attracted to art materials as spontaneously as they play with food on their plates or create monuments in backyard mud. Because making and marking are so very natural and appealing to children, the use of art media is a valuable avenue for expression when counseling the young (Rubin, 1988). Art therapy can be used in dealing with normal developmental problems and can promote identity building. Through art therapy, the counselor can focus on building client/student strengths by implementing art activities (Congdon, 1990). In this manner, art is used as a point of departure for free association, discussion, and eventual interpretation and insight (Rubin, 1988). Art therapy can aid students in expressing their emotions in such a way that the effect may help them understand their problems in a different 2 manner. It can be an important tool particularly for those clients who have a difficult time expressing their feelings verbally.

ART THERAPY IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL COUNSELING

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The Department of Educational Administration  
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by  
Jennifer S. Handeland  
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has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements  
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People tend to be less guarded about expressing themselves through drawings than through speech. Therefore, drawings can offer glimpses into the ways individuals see themselves and their worlds (Silver, 1988). Children are attracted to art materials as spontaneously as they play with food on their plates or create monuments in backyard mud. Because making and marking are so very natural and appealing to children, the use of art media is a valuable avenue for expression when counseling the young (Rubin, 1988).

Art therapy can be used in dealing with normal developmental problems and can promote identity building. Through art therapy, the counselor can focus on building client/student strengths by implementing art activities (Congdon, 1990). In this manner, art is used as a point of departure for free association, discussion, and eventual interpretation and insight (Rubin, 1988). Art therapy can aid students in expressing their emotions in such a way that the effect may help them understand their problems in a different

manner. It can be an important tool particularly for those clients who have a difficult time expressing their feelings verbally.

The field of art therapy has grown rapidly in the last twenty years. Although many practitioners work in clinical settings, almost as many work in educational settings with a substantial number of these individuals applying art therapy via art education. Today, many therapists and counselors continue to use art therapy in the schools to prevent and remediate problems (Rubin, 1988).

Children today struggle with many outside stressors. Rubin (1988) discussed times when children fail to overcome these stressors successfully and are subsequently referred to school counselors for help. The problems can be internal conflicts or developmental issues. The school counselor can use art therapy to understand the child's concerns. Sometimes the child is unable to express his/her feelings verbally. Art can be relaxing and soothing to a nervous child. If a child has a handful of clay, the manipulation

of the clay can become a wonderful lubricant for the verbal communication of thoughts and feelings.

Bertoia and Allan (1988) stated that students who are involved in creative, artistic work, are in tune with the events in their lives and will express this knowledge. These expressions will be in symbolic form, such as drawings, and will go to those who hear them, such as counselors.

Unsworth (1986) discussed using art therapy with children to provide a nonverbal, intuitive, open-ended approach to knowing and expressing, as well as enhancing artistic skills. Art activities stimulate the whole student.

Art therapy can enhance both the intrapersonal and interpersonal value of art making and appreciating, and the psychological maintenance or advancement of mental health. People who are struggling with problems often make reference to not knowing who they are and where they belong. They can feel disoriented and out of step with others and their surroundings. Art often functions in a very strong way to respond to these struggles (Congdon, 1990). A sense of

identity and belonging can result from the creation of an art form.

Children today deal with so many difficult outside problems that school counselors must be able to reach the child in whatever way possible to help overcome these problems. Art therapy can be very effective in reaching challenging students who have difficulty communicating verbally. Therefore, it is necessary for school counselors to become aware of the use of art therapy as an alternative counseling technique.

This review is intended to provide an understanding of the use of art therapy in elementary school counseling as a counseling technique. Art therapy is still considered a non-traditional counseling technique. This review will introduce an awareness to counselors concerning art therapy and its effectiveness in school counseling. It will specifically address what characteristics or conditions exist in the child for which art therapy is effective. It will explore the advantages and disadvantages of art



therapy as a counseling technique and present some noted results.

#### Characteristics or Conditions of the Child

Spontaneous drawings can reflect the child's inner or psychological world and can reveal physiological information from the child's unconscious level of existence (Bertoia & Allan, 1988). Art symbols can be containers of feelings and thoughts that remain silent in the child.

Sometimes a counselor may find that the child may have a difficult time expressing his/her inner world or feelings. Children in these situations may be anxious or wary of the counseling process (Rubin, 1988). The child may be chaotic or noisy during counseling (Hume & Hiti, 1988). The child may view him/herself in a negative way or carry the feelings of depression. Sadness or hopelessness toward life may be embedded in the child's emotions (Silver, 1988). A death or loss in his/her life, or even experiencing a terminal illness may cause suffering for the child (Bertoia & Allan, 1988). Mentally retarded children whose

language capacity lags may also find it difficult to express feelings verbally (Hume & Hiti, 1988).

When working with an anxious or wary child, the counselor must first establish some form of rapport (Rubin, 1988). Respect and trust are important in any counseling situation. A child who feels somewhat in control will become more relaxed and feel less threatened. Rubin goes on to suggest that when offering art materials at this time it might be wise for the counselor to allow the child to select his/her choice of materials. Materials can include pencils and paper, crayons, colored markers, or clay. The choice of art materials may become distinctive in the child's attitude during this time. The different types of media reflect different feelings. By allowing the child his/her choice of available materials, the counselor is then displaying respect for the student and his/her needs. Helping the anxious child to relax and feel at ease is a major task in the counseling process. Getting the student interested in, and using art materials will help in gaining his/her attention. After feeling at

ease, the child can express his/her feelings and emotions. These feelings may be expressed through drawings, paintings, or just relaxing while manipulating clay in his/her hands.

The chaotic or noisy child may seem somewhat uncontrollable in the counseling session (Hume & Hiti, 1988). Getting this child to relax and calm down may be achieved through art therapy. The use of art materials can get the child's mind on creating an idea on paper or with clay. This will help the child gain self-control and begin to express feelings and emotions. The chaotic child needs an outlet to help gain control of his/her nervous state.

The child who has negative views of self or the future may need more than just verbal communication (Silver, 1988). This child may be so withdrawn into self that he/she does not know how to express feelings. A child with a negative personal image may not even feel that he/she is good enough to share the feelings or the problems. Drawing can help the child express the emotions so the counselor may understand what feelings exist

and then begin to help the student work through the negative thoughts.

Silver (1988) reported a research process that involved students with depression. The research was designed to determine if drawings could help detect depression. An instrument titled, Draw a Story (DAS), was introduced to 254 students between the ages of 8 and 21. DAS displayed stimulus drawings reflecting negative ideas. The students were to look over the drawings, then make their own drawings, changing, adding or writing a brief story. From this study, Silver concluded of the 254 children and adolescents, 135 were presumably normal, 27 were clinically depressed, 31 were learning disabled, and 61 emotionally disturbed with nondepressive psychopathology. All children responded to the drawing task on two occasions. From these findings, the researcher found there appeared to be a correlation between depressive illness and strong, negative responses to the DAS task. It was concluded that there is a link between

depression and being able to express that depression through drawings.

Children feeling sadness or hopelessness may also respond to counseling through art therapy (Silver, 1988). These children can be withdrawn and quiet during normal activities in their lives. They tend to carry around problems in which they need to learn how to cope. Drawings can help surface their sad feelings and then be able to discuss where the feelings are originating. The counselor can then help the child become aware of ways to change the feelings into positive, happy thoughts.

There are other conditions where art therapy can be used appropriately. In this review the conditions that will be further addressed are children who are mentally ill, terminally ill, and those encountering death, either their own or a loved one.

Nonverbal communication, as a channel for intensified impulses, may be especially important for the mentally ill child whose language lags behind. Visual images create concrete equivalents

that may sometimes lead to expressing feelings. Art may help the mentally ill build ego strengths and express powerful emotions (Hume & Hiti, 1988).

The terminally ill must work through stages in order to come to grips with their bleak future (Bertoia & Allan, 1988). One process is to take the child through progressive stages of the dying phase. According to Bertoia and Allan, the first stage is for the child to believe he/she is always ill and will get better. The child will draw according to this idea. The next stage is for the child to realize he/she is always ill and will never get better, followed by the dying stage. The child is encouraged to keep a continuous journal with drawings and brief writing descriptions about the process of his/her terminal illness. These drawings allow the child to express whatever feelings are happening at that time. The counselor can identify feelings from these drawings and help the child in dealing with these feelings.

The child who encounters death can be dealt with in a similar manner (Bertoia & Allan, 1988).

Encouraging the child to draw the person and talk about the loss will be helpful in working through the death process. Acceptance of the death will result in recognizing the unwanted feelings.

There are many characteristics or conditions that exist in students who are in need of counseling in which art therapy may be applied. Art therapy may be introduced when the child is withdrawn, depressed, or uncontrollable. It helps to relax the student and open avenues to expressing feelings that are not able to be expressed verbally.

#### Advantages and Disadvantages of Art Therapy

As in any counseling technique, there are advantages and disadvantages that can be pointed out. Art therapy will not only enhance creative skills, but also provide a nonverbal, intuitive, open-ended approach to knowing and expressing. Art activities can stimulate the whole student. A great deal of education uses the "out-side" approach to learning: feed the student information, then require him/her to memorize, organize, and return the information on tests.

Art can begin from inside the child, where the counselor can tap the student's potential and allow it to develop individually (Unsworth, 1986).

A child's earliest behavior is characterized by an openness to every sense. The child explores, tries, delights, and grows naturally toward making connections and using his/her imagination. Invention on the part of the individual is a great developmental tool to promote a healthy child with positive self-acceptance. The child's imagination can emerge through art therapy (Unsworth, 1986).

Art therapy can aid the counselor in diagnosing the problem at an earlier session rather than trying to wait for the student to be vocal about his/her problems (Riley, 1987). Art gives the counselor a chance to look for feelings before they are actually expressed verbally.

Riley (1987) stated that art therapy motivates client participation. Adolescents may feel more at ease when actively doing something with their hands. Most adolescents get more pleasure from action. Riley goes on to say that



because art therapy is an active and largely noninterpretive technique, it works well with adolescents.

Counselors must also be aware of disadvantages that have emerged from the use of art therapy. One concern is that counselors must be able to interpret the art drawings exactly as the child is expressing them (Barlow, 1982). Questions to the child about the art work should be purposeful and relate to problems or conditions of the child. The counselor must know where and how to ask questions and then what to do with the important information received.

Rubin (1988) stated that it may take practice in working with children's drawings before counselors can accurately interpret them. Simple drawings that come from an invitation to create are safer for the average counselor. Rubin also indicated that an art class or a course in art therapy may be helpful to the counselor. Similar to other counseling techniques, it takes practice and experience for the counseling application to flow effectively.

Not only is it vital to be able to interpret what the drawings say, but colors, textures and materials are also a part of reading the child's inner feelings. Different colors reflect different feelings. For example, blue tends toward coolness and the browns are more earthy, warm feelings. Textures can range from hard or rough to smooth. Hard or rough textures may mean the child is stressed in some manner and smooth texture may indicate some sense of calmness. The different materials chosen by the child can allow the counselor to interpret how he/she is feeling during the process. All of these aspects should be taken into account when interpreting feelings.

The feelings that children get from beginning their own art work may reflect negative connotations (Congdon, 1990). Society has led people to put emphasis on doing art work at their best. Some students may not feel they are good at art work. The quality of the work is not the issue, and this must be taken into account with the child.

In a study done by Allan and Crandall (1986), children listened to a 10-minute audiotape on relaxation and then guided visualization was developed based on the imagery of a rosebush. It was assumed the children would project their own personalities into the image of the rosebush. The children were introduced to the tape as a way of developing their imagination and were told to visualize themselves as a rosebush, noting their flowers, leaves, stems and branches. Children who were thought of as being able to effectively cope with their problems and children who had been abused were involved in this study. Allan and Crandall concluded from the drawings that coping children tend to draw pictures that reflected very positive images: a blooming rosebush, bright sun and positive aspects of nature. The study also revealed that abused children, who had become withdrawn, drew pictures for protection: the rosebush had a fence around it, or evidence of violence: a cracked, ruptured road. Children's drawings and the words they use to describe them

can give the school counselor a view into the inner world of feelings.

It is not as important for the counselor to focus on the art product as it is to focus on the process (Barlow, 1982). Once the process is underway, the counselor can observe what the child is doing, as well as how he/she prepares to do the work. The child may be exhibiting behaviors that are reactions to family dynamics, especially if the child is drawing pictures of the family.

The fluid integration of art with discussion of the work allows the students to move back and forth between modes of expression (Hume & Hiti, 1988). By drawing, the students are able to put into words their own disruptive feelings. Discussion allows the counselor to go deeper in examining the feelings than the child may even be aware. All of this contributes to emotional and social growth and meets the needs of the students who are struggling from the desire for self acceptance.

Art therapy allows the child to understand his/her work as an idea, a dream, a frustration or

a struggle (Roussos, 1983). The counselor can help the child learn of his/her feelings, then teach him/her how to capture a dream, overcome fears, or to build trust. All of this will promote interpersonal relationships with others and personal accomplishments.

Art therapy can bring emotions to the surface for both the counselor and child to become aware of and then to deal with those emotions. During the process the child can become relaxed, and feel less intimidated about being in counseling (Unsworth, 1986). The counselor in turn gains trust and respect from the child. Art therapy becomes an inside-out approach for the child to express feelings.

### Conclusions

In addressing the issue of art therapy as an elementary school counseling technique, the literature presented characteristics and conditions that exist in the child when art therapy may become a productive counseling method. The child may have a difficult time expressing feelings. Art therapy can help the unspoken

feelings emerge through drawings. The child may view self in a negative way or feel depressed. Feelings of sadness and hopelessness towards his/her life may be embedded in the child's emotions. Art products produced by these children may possess expressions that can be correlated with the child's feelings. Children who suffer from a death, loss or even mental illness can be treated through art therapy in counseling. The art therapy method in these cases would promote the child to think about the feelings and the trauma in his/her life. Dealing with feelings that have been recognized would enable the child to begin to cope with his/her future in a positive light.

Art therapy has been used in school counseling effectively and the research relates to advantages as well as disadvantages of this counseling method. The troubled child who comes to the school counselor can feel relaxed and comfortable with art materials. The counselor through art media, can develop rapport, trust and respect with the child. Counselors are able to

pull emotions from students who have communication drawback. The drawings and art work represent emotions and feelings that are hidden or difficult for the child to talk about. Sometimes the child is not fully aware of the problems or concerns affecting his/her daily life.

Research done on results of using art therapy shows that coping children draw positive images and abused children tend to draw pictures showing protection or violence. Children involved in art therapy counseling have been shown to become relaxed and respond more positively toward the counselor. Art therapy allows the counselor to explore more deeply into the child's feelings and explore his/her emotions. This enables the counselor to begin positive interventions with the child.

Although art therapy has been used during the past 20 years, it is a relatively non-traditional counseling approach today. Most of the research presented successful applications of the technique. It was reported, however, that many practicing counselors have had little training in

interpreting the art work. It seemed vital to understand exactly what feelings the child is expressing and then know how to intervene appropriately on behalf of the child. It was implied that counselors involved in art therapy need to enroll in art classes or art therapy seminars to understand the concepts of the art work. Future research on this issue would seem important.

Few studies revealed the impact of art therapy in elementary school counseling within the past years. School counselors need to be aware of non-traditional counseling methods that are helping children cope with their problems. Additional research in this area would be beneficial to counselors using this method.

In the literature review, art therapy has been suggested to be an effective counseling technique to use in the elementary schools. There is a need, however, to heighten the awareness of art therapy use to school counselors. Counselors need to be aware of this alternative technique that could enable them to reach those students who



have difficulties in communication. In light of this, further study involving the use of art therapy as a counseling approach in the elementary schools seems appropriate.

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