

Therapeutic Art Practices with Orphan Children in Bulgaria

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Abstract

This paper presents therapeutic art practices carried out with 60 orphan children in the small town of Ugarchin in northern Bulgaria. In 1999, a group of artists and teachers developed a varied program of art activities for these children. These activities included two 1-week visits and the opening of five art workshops—Art History, Ceramics, Painting, Installation Art, and Fashion Design. Given the high level of illiteracy among the children, as well as their difficulty verbalizing feelings and ideas, the group understood that the visual arts would provide a direct and immediate link to the children. The goals were to counteract negative influences in their lives, to improve their overall psychological and emotional state, and to broaden their cultural interests and understanding. The results, based on personal observation, validate therapeutic art practices as effective in a difficult context.

Setting the Context

Orphan Children in Bulgaria

Bulgaria is a country that was part of the former Communist bloc in southeastern Europe. One of the tragic consequences of the previous regime is the large number of orphanages located in poorly settled regions. In these areas today, massive unemployment leads to stressful situations in which these children are often neglected. The poor living conditions and shortages of qualified staff contribute to developmental problems among the children. Many exhibit impaired intellectual development as well as some psychological and nervous disorders. They suffer from social isolation and illiteracy and have great difficulty integrating into society once they leave the orphanages at age 20.

The children involved in this study—60 orphan children from the town of Ugarchin—are typical examples of the orphan population. The following list describes some of the symptoms and behavioral characteristics from which these children suffer. This list was established over extended periods of work at the orphanage prior to this study: (a) aggressive behavior towards others, (b) slight tendencies towards autism, (c) low level of cultural awareness, (d) lack of interest and ambition, (e) anti-social behavior, (f) low

self-confidence, (g) short attention span and lack of concentration, and (h) emotional deprivation.

Views on Therapeutic Art Practices in Bulgaria

While art therapy is part of the education process in Bulgaria, it is usually offered under the auspices of “the education of emotions,” “the cultivation of creative skills,” and so on. This terminology expresses a basic underlying mistrust of the word “therapy”—which is associated with mental illness. Particularly in the case of children, therapy is considered dangerous and is, therefore, treated with reservation. The work with the orphans of Ugarchin was an effort to enlarge the prevailing view of art therapy in Bulgaria. It shows a shift towards an increased interest in art therapy as it is incorporated in educational systems in the United States, England, Canada, and Germany, among others.

The author of this article understands the function of art therapy to be the activation of the inner potential of every child and the harmonious development of personhood. In the author’s opinion, the major characteristics of art therapy that make it useful in child development are as follows:

1. Everyone plays a part in the process regardless of creative experience and skill.
2. Art therapy is a means of nonverbal communication.
3. The creative act allows for gathering information in a pleasant way and thus encourages the retaining of information.
4. Elements of play exist in therapeutic art activities.
5. Art therapy allows for the revealing of unconscious processes that exist in the human psyche.
6. Creative work is a catalyst for positive feelings that stimulate and vitalize human behavior.

Techniques of Art Therapy: General Considerations

As a separate field in rehabilitative, pedagogical, and social work, art therapy was formed in the 1930s. In her major work on art therapy, Waller (1991) points to the following individuals as pioneers in the field: artists Adrian Hill, Edith Kramer, Margaret Naumburg, Florence Cane, Marie Petrie, and Edward Adamson, and psychotherapists Irene Champernowne, E.M. Liddiatt, and Ralf Pickford.

In the beginning, the very essence of art therapy distinguished itself as a crossbreed between two different fields—psychotherapy and art. Until the early 1960s, the theo-

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retical tenets were determined by the theories of Freud and Jung, and artistic works were used as a means of nonverbal assessment in psychoanalysis. It was not long before the achievements of the humanistic and existential theories flooded the field, suggesting that art could reveal one's identity and understanding of life. Art could give birth to new ideas and enrich personal experience and knowledge.

Today, three major approaches toward art therapy exist: individual, group, and family. This paper examines the application of group therapy, which is the basic therapy used in pedagogical practice. According to Liebmann (1987), group therapy cultivates valuable social habits and positive attitudes among the members of the group, improves self-esteem, and stimulates decision-making and taking responsibility. Liebmann suggests a division into three major types of group therapy: (a) an open group in a studio characterized by the absence of permanent participants and by conditions which resemble those in an art studio, (b) a closed analytical group with permanent participants oriented towards the unconscious psychic processes, and (c) a topically oriented group concerned with the general interests and problems of the participants, who in turn can leave the group at a particular stage and be replaced by others.

In the experimental part of this project, the art therapists did not make a strict distinction; rather, they used a combination of elements from the first and third forms.

Therapeutic Art Techniques Involving Children

For many children, verbal communication becomes a problem at the very start of their primary education, particularly when speech disorders are involved. In such cases, the visual arts offer another way for children to express themselves. As a preliminary evaluation, a child's painting may say a lot about the child's intellectual and psychological state of mind. However, in the process of making a diagnosis, there is a real danger of the therapist distorting the meaning of the symbols and signs used in the child's painting by inserting his or her own ideas and expectations. Baumann (1996) warns against underestimation of the child's psyche and claims that children have to be regarded as the ultimate experts in their world of ideas.

In this respect, Walker (1986) suggests the following stages in work with children: (a) preliminary diagnosis, (b) establishing a relationship with the child, (c) helping the child with the verbalization of the material, (d) helping the child with the realization of the symbolic material, and (e) creating new interests leading to psychological and social development. Preliminary evaluation is very important since children with learning problems are often labeled indiscriminately. Such labels often disguise our own inability to perceive their physical and emotional problems as well as their uniqueness. Diagnosis should pay attention not only to their neuropsychological state and general literacy, but also to their creativity, memory, attention span, and space orientation. The art therapist Currant (1989), after years of work with children who lag behind in school,

claims that very often the issue is not that these children have educational difficulties, but that they understand the material in a different way. She refers to the necessity of new styles of education that could lead to better results in the learning process.

Experimental Art Therapy in Ugarchin

Background

In 1999, a group of artists and teachers initiated therapeutic art classes with 60 children between the ages of 7 and 18 at the orphanage in the town of Ugarchin, Bulgaria. The classes were held over the summer holiday when the children had no other planned activities. The group felt the need to fill the vacuum created by the lack of a summer program and hoped to provide the children with creative tasks that were both innovative and stimulating as a way to counterbalance the difficult conditions of their daily lives.

The project was made possible thanks to financial support from the Phare's social program. Phare is one of three preaccession programs financed by the European Communities to assist the applicant countries of Central Europe in their preparations for joining the European Union. The project team consisted of five artists with experience in teaching who had already established a relationship of mutual trust with the children through working as volunteers at the orphanage over a 3-year period.

The classes included two 1-week visits to the orphanage and the opening of five art workshops: Art History, Ceramics, Painting, Installation Art, and Fashion Design. This diverse program allowed all children to participate in the artistic process and gave them a chance to choose among activities. These classes included four age groups: 7-10 years, 11-12 years, 13-15 years, and 16-20 years. For each age level, specific tasks were chosen with varying levels of difficulty and subject matter. The classes took place in the morning and afternoon, with each one lasting about 2 hours.

Each group included approximately 12-15 children with two adult group leaders. The initial sessions involved introducing the children to art materials and techniques. Then each new theme was introduced and specific tasks were assigned, a summary of which is outlined below. Once the children understood how to use the materials and the basic guidelines for each assignment, they were left on their own to choose their means of expression.

Workshop on Art History (8 Sessions/16 Hours Total)

The first week-long session involved an introduction to art history through a general survey of art from antiquity to the present. Material was presented in visual form from art books and other reproductions. The goal was to introduce the children to the notion of artistic style and trend and to give an overall visual picture of different historical periods in art. The second week involved making copies of famous works of art using watercolors, tempera, oil paints, and modeling clay. The hope was to provide the



Figure 1
The Head Warrior, ceramics



Figure 2
Dancing Girl, ceramics

children with a deeper insight into greater artistic culture and to deepen their interest in art.

The team was interested in the process of “decoding” works of art together with the children. Children were taught the meaning of symbols in order to decipher the meaning of a particular piece of art and to then use such “indirect” methods and symbols in their own work. Apart from their general interest in reproducing landscape painting, they showed particular interest in female and/or mother images such as the Virgin Mary and the Mona Lisa.

Workshop on Ceramics

(12 Sessions/24 Hours Total)

The first week introduced the children to the basics of clay modeling and painting on clay. The children were acquainted with ideas of line, stamping in clay, and laying on color. These exercises involved only flat forms in clay.

During the second week, emphasis was placed on the idea of sculpture—three-dimensional form as well as painting with glazes. In this way, the children were introduced to three-dimensional art. In their modeling, they often transferred subject matter from their two-dimensional drawings and paintings—trees, figures, the sun, a house—though in a more decorative style. The children were particularly interested in sculptures of the head (Figures 1 and 3). For example, they showed painstaking modeling while copying African masks. They also showed interest in making miniature human figures (Figure 2), houses, and gardens and making articles with a utilitarian function—cups, vases, plates—to be used in their everyday lives.

Workshop on Painting

(15 Sessions/32 Hours Total)

The first week involved introducing the children to basic notions of composition, color, and painting technique. An outing was organized in which landscapes were painted from nature (Figure 4). The children used watercolors, tempera, and (in some cases) collage and were asked to think about the arrangement of shapes, the use of contrast, and the harmony of color. In the second week, monotype inks and oil paints were presented. The aim was to achieve a more detailed development of the artistic image in terms of color and expressive choice. The overall task of the workshop was to give the children maximum opportunity for emotional expression. Different media were introduced with the hope that each child would respond to a certain one. The results were extraordinarily free and expressive. Many children experimented just with color and produced color abstractions that were remarkable. The ways that the children mixed, selected, and applied color showed a level of control and sensitivity above and beyond what they had shown previously.

Workshop on Installation Art

(3 Sessions/12 Hours Total)

In this workshop, the children were introduced to the idea of monumental art—art larger than human size. They were expected to work on a group art project, which required more cooperation and teamwork. The children were asked to construct a subject of their choice out of



Figure 3
Head, ceramics

recyclable materials. As a result, the children built a construction from cartons and boxes that they called "Dragon." During the second week, they made "Wigwam" and "The Castle of Ugarchin," using nylon, styrofoam, spray paint, and wood. Bringing the artistic activities into the open air enhanced the sense of play common to children's games. Building a shelter opened unforeseen opportunities for them to change their environment, give it an unusual appearance, and have fun in it. Given that their environment is depressing for many of them, it is easy to assess the therapeutic effect that such games had on them.

Workshop on Fashion Design (10 Sessions/26 Hours Total)

This workshop similarly emphasized cooperation and teamwork. The first week's sessions included talks on the history of the costume, on different types of materials and clothing, on the making of clothing, and on fashion tendencies. These talks were enhanced by videos of fashion shows and by fashion magazines. The goal was to get them ready to design their own clothes. This week also involved dyeing T-shirts with special dyes. The second week involved the preparation of a fashion show by all the children. They designed their own models and dressed up in them, then choreographed a fashion show. Each child walked out on stage in costume, with music in the background.

This workshop allowed for a different kind of play. It gave each child the opportunity to turn into someone else, to behave in an unusual way, and to attract the attention of the



Figure 4
The Forest, oil painting

others. This was greatly appealing to the children, and they embarked on making the show with both eagerness and seriousness. The result was a grand fashion show that was documented by video camera and became a favorite memory.

Results

The therapeutic art practice established by the European Consortium of Art Therapeutic Education (Kopitin, 2001) argues for the noninterference in the creative act, stating that censorship of any form would hinder the free expression of feelings and thoughts of the client. The group of artists and teachers accepted this as a basic principle of work with the children of Ugarchin. The group attempted in each session to give the children the greatest possible freedom in their work. Each child chose his or her own tools and approach. In this way an atmosphere respecting personal space was encouraged and led to a surprising number of original works. The next step was to develop their sense of teamwork through group tasks such as collages, installations, and larger constructions. The most complicated task in terms of organization was the preparation for the fashion show. The idea that the children could work together, with each responsible for his or her own duty, brought them together and helped them build more positive relationships.

Evaluation of Artwork

Throughout the 2-week period, over 150 works were created in the history of art workshop, 80 works in the ceramics workshop, 300 in the painting workshop, and 200 in the fashion workshop (Figure 5). An evaluation of the artwork at the end of the therapeutic art classes was reached through the following criteria: (a) the number of colors used (variety of value and hue/extent of experimentation and control), (b) the number of figures or shapes in a given composition (complexity of composition), (c) the variety of subject matter dealt with, (d) the use of new techniques, and (e) the formulation of original ideas.



Figure 5
The Exhibition of Artworks in Sofia, Bulgaria

The evaluation of the artwork showed the following results: (a) an improved sense of color, (b) a heightened self-confidence in composition, (c) an increase in originality of subject and form, (d) an improved ability to transfer emotional experience into visual expression, (e) an improvement of artistic skill, (f) a deepened understanding of art and the artistic process, and (g) a broadened sense of artistic culture in general.

Evaluation of Participants

The project team assessed the children's overall social and psychological state at the end of the sessions, based on observations of behavior before and throughout the sessions. The following results were announced:

1. There were fewer conflicts among the children. The children showed an increased interest toward each others' work and willingness for cooperation.
2. The children showed higher self-esteem, more independence, and greater concentration.
3. The children showed an eagerness for artistic expression, enthusiastically participating in workshops.

4. The children showed a desire to verbally express what they had done artistically, often sharing problems with the art therapists.
5. The children revealed an interest in fields of knowledge previously unknown to them.

Conclusion

Art therapy undertaken with the orphan children of Ugarchin was a remarkable experience—both stimulating and beneficial—that could provide ideas to those interested in art therapy with children in or outside a school context. The wide range of subjects and materials opened up many opportunities for these particular children to express themselves in structured play. This type of expression is of greatest importance for the healthy development of unique personalities. As artists and educators, we benefit by coming to know children better through their thoughts, inventions, and artworks. Such work encourages a more respectful approach to the uniqueness of each child.

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Call for Journal Cover Art

The AATA Journal is seeking submissions of artwork from art therapists who have not previously had their art featured on a journal cover. The art must be in **vertical format** to be considered but may be in either color or black and white media. Please submit a slide, a 5" x 7" glossy print, five (5) photocopies, and a brief description of the work (title, dimensions, medium) and its content (meaning, inspiration, process). Also include pertinent information about yourself as requested by the "Attention Authors" form on the last page of this issue.