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ART THERAPY AS AN EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTION FOCUSED ON SOCIAL RELATIONS OF CHILDREN AT A YOUNGER SCHOOL AGE

ARTETERAPIA JAKO INTERWENCJA WYCHOWAWCZA UKIERUNKOWANA NA RELACJE SPOŁECZNE DZIECI W MŁODSZYM WIEKU SZKOLNYM

Keywords:

art therapy, peer relations, educational innovations, stimulation of the emotional and social development, early age education

Summary: At their first stage of education, children face the intensified process of acquiring emotional and social competence, as well as developing interpersonal relations. It is of crucial value to make this process go smoothly and be well stimulated. In this era of modern threats, this process poses a challenge for teachers, forcing them to seek innovative and attractive educational methods which will enable them to have a gentle impact on the personal motivation of a young learner in his or her emotional and social abilities of interpersonal peer relations. This text is a description of research in the area of the use of art therapy in early learner education in the scope of their interpersonal relations. The author tries to demonstrate that art therapy can become a major key in resolving educational obstacles and can have a positive impact on interpersonal relations of children in their early education.

Słowa kluczowe:
terapia sztuką,
relacje rówieśnicze,
nowe rozwiązania
wychowawcze,
stymulowanie rozwoju
emocjonalno-
społecznego,
edukacja elementarna

Streszczenie: Dzieci w młodszym wieku szkolnym przechodzą okres wzmożonego nabywania kompetencji emocjonalno-społecznych, a także zawiązywania pierwszych relacji interpersonalnych. Ważne jest, by proces ten przebiegał harmonijnie i był właściwie stymulowany. W dobie współczesnych zagrożeń jest to wyzwanie dla pedagogów, które zmusza do poszukiwania nowych, atrakcyjnych, a zarazem prostych dla dzieci metod oddziaływania wychowawczego – by mało inwazyjnie, dyskretnie i subtelnie wpływać na młodego człowieka oraz jego motywacje w obszarze umiejętności emocjonalno-społecznych z zakresu relacji rówieśniczych. Niniejszy tekst jest opisem badań nad wykorzystaniem metod arteterapeutycznych w pracy z dziećmi w młodszym wieku szkolnym w obszarze relacji rówieśniczych. Autorka stara się dowieść, że arteterapia może stać się odpowiedzią na współczesne wyzwania wychowawcze i wpływać na relacje rówieśnicze dzieci w młodszym wieku szkolnym.

Introduction

School is one of the most important learning environments, since it is school that forms the correct patterns of social behavior, builds motivation to create interactions and affects sensitivity and openness to other people. In order to achieve these goals, it is necessary for schools to implement an educational method which would influence young people and their motivations in the area of emotional and social skills in a low-impact, discreet and subtle way; shaping young learners' personality, it would also give them the freedoms of action, self-creation and self-discovery.

The non-medical approach to the subject of art therapy, which is increasingly common in Poland and other countries, is based on the idea of supporting the development of an individual to the full and harmonious growth of their personality and predispositions (Chmielnicka-Plaskota, Łoza & Szulc, 2014). Importantly, art therapy does not have to be addressed exclusively to the sick (Janicki, 1990). It can also be perceived as an educational intervention that supports and stimulates development through the therapeutic impact of art (Florczykiewicz, 2015).

It is worth analyzing the wealth of methods, techniques and means of artistic expression proposed by art therapy in a broad sense. Properly introduced to educational institutions, it can be a response to the emerging needs of present and future generations, as well as an aid for teachers in the educational process. Art therapy gives one the opportunity to meet one's emotions and experiences with the help of artistic expression and activity (Szabelska, 2012). Aesthetic and emotional experiences triggered during the process of creation can help one in coping with reality and building a system of values, which influences the valorization of experience and finding one's place in the world (Malinowska & Jabłońska, 2016). Various means of artistic expression give children the opportunity to communicate on a new level that creates a sense of security. Art offers them the opportunity to manifest themselves and their views, and the outcomes of the process can, but do not have to, become a line of mutual understanding and discussion (Kuciapiński, 2013). Artistic activities create the right conditions for the participants to get to know each other and can strengthen cooperation in a social group while maintaining individuality and barriers that are safe for children (Pikała & Sasin, 2016).

In his publication, A. Gilroy (2009) introduces the need to conduct research on the phenomenon of art therapy. The analysis of the materials and conclusions from the research collected by the author show that art therapy has a positive effect on children and youth and can become one of the means of influence in the education and upbringing of children and adolescents.

The possibility of using art therapy in working with children of early school age with the goal of strengthening peer relations is, therefore, the subject of this article which summarizes research on this area. However, it is likewise worth paying attention to research on related topics. In one of her publications, for instance, J. Gładyszewska-Cylko (2011) focused on the possibilities of using art therapy in early childhood education. She noticed that after classes with elements of art therapy, the process of class integration was accelerated and strengthened. Subsequent studies by the same author indicate an increase in the activity and openness of shy children, an improvement of their ability to deal with emotions and a development of their positive self-image through artistic interactions which also affect relationships with peers (Gładyszewska-Cylulko, 2007).

Research conducted by D. Gulińska-Grzeluska (2011) proves that the therapeutic impact of music supports the process of leveling aggression and modeling social behavior. As a result, it shapes the relationships of children with their surroundings and peers.

Studies by A. Glińska-Lachowicz (2010), in turn, do not concern children in early school age, but students of resocialization. They show that according to 78% of students, participation in art therapy classes positively affected their relationship with the environment. During free conversations with the author, the respondents also claimed that the opportunity to participate in art therapies in a broad sense influenced their private lives, shaping better reactions to situations, resistance to stress, relaxation and coping with emotions.

Citing the view of J. Florczykiewicz (2015), one can say that attempts to systematize knowledge in the field of art therapy lie at the core of its theoretical assumptions and provoke discussion on the possibilities of its application. It can therefore be assumed that the growing interest in art therapy in the social or pedagogical perspective may contribute to the development of research in the field of art therapy in the contemporary education and upbringing process.

Methodology and Description of My Research

The subject of the research that I carried out in 2016–2017 was the use of art therapy as an educational intervention to improve peer relations in a class group. The needs of pedagogical practice have made me think that this area is becoming an important reference point in search for new solutions in the era of contemporary educational threats related to social relations.

The aim of this research was to investigate the importance of using art therapy as an educational intervention in working with children at a younger school age to improve peer relations in a class group by getting to know teachers' opinions on the use of the chosen methods and children's views on their participation in art therapy classes, as well as the impact these have had on their relationships in the group.

I tried to find answers to the research problems which took the form of the following questions:

1. Can art-therapy methods become an educational intervention in working with children at a younger school age in the area of improving the quality of social relations in a given group? If yes, what is the extent of their influence?
2. Does art therapy affect the peer relationships of children at a younger school age? If yes, what is the extent of its influence?

In order to collect the necessary data, I conducted a series of classes with the use of elements of art-therapy. Before and immediately after the end of the classes, I carried out a sociometric test to check the relationships of children in a given class. I also used a direct group interview with children who took part in the classes and a survey for teachers of early school education in which I asked about their opinions on the above topic. The basis of the educational actions aimed at improving emotional and social skills conditioning peer relations was the use of various types of art therapy. The recipients of the classes were 74 children from the area of the Śląskie Voivodeship taking part in the interview. The sociometric test was carried out in one of the classes participating in the activities, which consisted of 15 people. The opinion survey included 74 early school education teachers from all over Poland.

According to 70 (95%) of the surveyed teachers of early school education, it is possible to apply art therapy in working with children at early school age. Four respondents (5%) were of a different opinion; three of them are, however, professionally inactive. In the question about the possibility of using art therapy in the field of early school education, 79% of respondents considered this therapy effective and functional. Respondents were free to formulate their own answers. Their summary is shown in Figure 1.

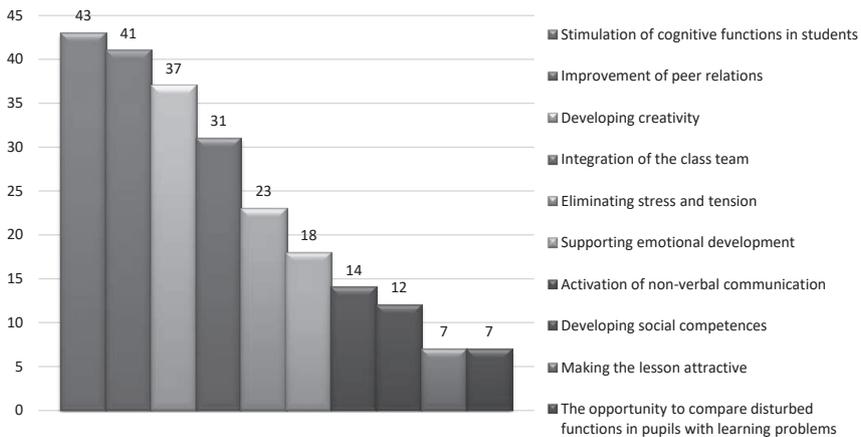


Figure 1.

Objectives of art therapy for working with children at a younger school age.

Source: own research.

According to the respondents, the aims of art therapy can be stimulation of cognitive functions (43 people, 58%), improvement of peer relations (41 people, 55%), as well as stimulation of creativity (37 people, 50%). Teachers also indicated that art therapy could be used to integrate the class team (31 people, 41%), eliminate tensions (23 people, 31%), support emotional development (18 people, 24%), support non-verbal communication (14 people, 19%) and support the development of social competences (12 people, 16%). Seven people (10%) chose the opportunity to compare disturbed functions in pupils with learning problems and the use of art therapy to increase the attractiveness of the lesson. Most of the answers concerned improving the functioning of the socio-emotional area, which is directly conditioned by the social relations of children at a younger school age. The integration of the class team is closely related to improving relationships in a given group. Removing stress and tensions becomes the foundation for building a sense of security, and thus, for establishing and maintaining relationships in an atmosphere that fosters mutual respect and understanding. By supporting children's emotional development, they can be made sensitive to the situations and perspectives of others; one can also teach them appropriate patterns of coping with their own emotional states. Supporting non-verbal communication allows for a better reading of the reactions of others and the transmission of important impulses in the process of communication between peers. Therefore, it can be acknowledged that all these elements become important when strengthening ties and relations between not only children but also adults.

Only 40 (54%) of teachers actively employ the elements of art therapy in their work. In general, these were teachers of a younger age. Other teachers who indicated the possibility of using art therapy in early school education did not, in fact, use it in practice.

Only few respondents in the age group above 41 use art therapy, while 34 (46%) do not use it at all. People declaring the use of art-therapy elements were asked to indicate the results they achieved thanks to them. Only 28 (70%) people from the 40 (100%) shared their insights in the questionnaire. It may be considered surprising that the teachers who admitted to the use of art therapy could not or did not want to indicate the results that these activities brought.

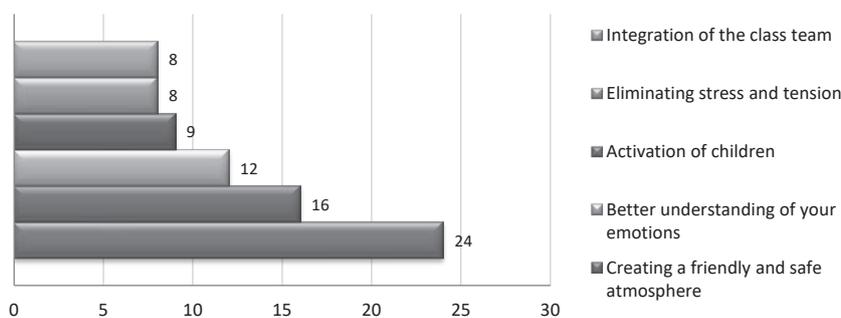


Figure 2.

Results of the use of art-therapy methods in working with children by teachers of early school education.

Source: own research.

The chart shows that thanks to art therapy 42 (57%) teachers observed improvement in peer relations, 16 (22%) saw improvement of the atmosphere in class, 12 (16%) noted a better understanding of their emotions by their pupils, 9 (12%) said that the classes helped in the activation of the group, 8 (11%) indicated the elimination of stress and tensions, and 8 (11%) asserted that the class was better integrated. Particular attention should be paid to disproportions in the opinions of teachers who only theoretically know the art-therapy method and those who apply it in their work. In the opinion of respondents actively using art therapy, its impact occurs in the socio-emotional sphere, while in the theoretical approach, the respondents also focus on the possibilities of interaction in the cognitive sphere.

What arouses enthusiasm is the fact that as many as 64 (86%) of the respondents showed an interest and willingness to use elements of art therapy at work in order to improve the quality of social life of the children in their class. Only 10 (14%) of the respondents were not interested in this solution – most of them were characterized by a negative approach to the subject of this research while filling out the questionnaire or had not had contact with art therapy. People wanting to use elements of art therapy indicate its attractiveness (34 people, 53%), interest in its effectiveness (29 people, 45%), its innovative approach to the subject of peer relationships (17 people, 23%) and the need to look for new solutions to social problems which appear nowadays (8 people, 12%).

In the eyes of the teachers, it is possible to apply art therapy to improve socio-emotional relations in children at a younger school age. Are classes with art-therapy elements interesting and attractive for children? Do they motivate them to be active in social integration with others? Can they be an alternative to improving and acquiring communication skills and emotional intuition? Answers to these questions can be found in the opinions and views of the children about the classes using art-therapy methods. They were given such opportunity in the cycle of classes during which art therapy allowed them to manifest themselves and their views using various fields of art. They could thus establish relationships with their peers and compare their experiences and views with the opinions of others.

During the activities designed and carried out by me, I noticed an increased activity of children and their interest in a new form and principles of work. The group interview showed that 62 children (84%) assessed participation in classes positively, 2 students (3%) said that they did not like them – that they were boring and required cooperation with people they did not like, while 10 children (35%) did not voice their opinions in the conversation. The students' statements about the classes are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Argumentation of the statements about the children's attitude to participation in the art-therapy classes

	Argumentation	Number of people
1.	The classes were interesting and attractive	49 (66%)
2.	We were not graded and there were no imposed standards	28 (38%)
3.	We could find out some interesting things about ourselves	13 (18%)
4.	We had a lot of freedom	12 (16%)
5.	Very interesting and surprising works were created	10 (35%)
6.	The classes were weird and boring	2 (3%)

Source: own research.

The children recognized that the classes were interesting and attractive. They also noticed that they were not graded and that they were able to use various means of expression freely – without any barriers to the assignment of jobs, tools, or instructions. During the interview, children often expressed their surprise at the fact that others may perceive things differently than they do,

or the fact that working with a different friend/colleague than usual is really “cool.” These answers coincide with the ones presented in chart 3 which summarizes the answers to the question of what surprised children in their classes. They could have spoken on this topic during the interview.

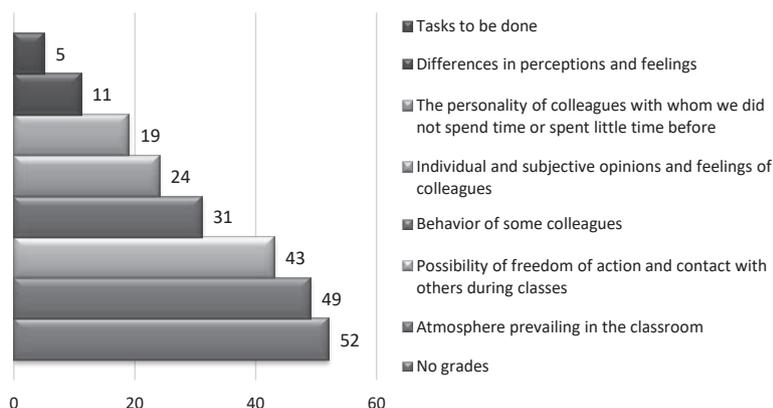


Figure 3.
Elements surprising children during classes.
Source: own research.

The children were the most surprised that they were not graded – their work was not exposed to criticism or comparison to the work of others, which sometimes makes them sad; 52 students (70%) expressed this opinion. Forty-nine participants (66%) were surprised by many positive comments about their work and ideas, which gave them great pleasure, and 43 (58%) stated that it was nice to talk freely and walk around the classroom during classes. Nineteen children (26%), in turn, did not expect that a colleague with whom they had not cooperated before could be so interesting and nice. At the same time, they declared their willingness to get to know each other and have fun together. This is also related to the fact that the behavior of peers was different than usual, as indicated by 31 pupils (42%). Children openly admitted that they were surprised by the reaction, positive actions and approach to cooperation of individual colleagues who usually behave slightly differently. This argumentation concerned mainly the behavior of children who are often withdrawn and shy or vice versa – those who are often aggressive or tease others. This is also confirmed by the observation that these children tried to cooperate and were

very keen on the final result of their work. For many pupils, a big surprise was the difference in perception that could be noticed during the class. Eleven children (15%) commented on the diametric differences in the perception and assessment of themselves and their colleagues. Interestingly, 5 children (7%) brought attention to the fact that the classes in which they participated were significantly different from their standard school lessons. This probably results from the observations noted and described above.

The positive reception of classes with the use of art-therapy elements was also indicated by the children's questions about whether and when the next such classes will take place. The interview also gave them the opportunity to say whether or not they would like them to take place more often. All children were asked to answer this question. Sixty-four students (85% of those taking part in the classes) declared that they would eagerly participate in the next classes; 7 children (10%) did not specify their opinion; and 4 students (5%) acknowledged that they did not want to participate in such activities. Having given their answers, the children had the opportunity to provide arguments supporting their views. Not everyone, however, wanted to share their insights on this topic. Arguments that demonstrate the children's attitude to continuing the classes are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Arguments regarding the attitude of children to the continuation of classes with elements of art therapy

	Argumentation	Number of people
1.	The classes were fun	54 (73%)
2.	We did not have lessons	18 (24%)
3.	We could find out some interesting things about each other	17 (23%)
4.	We like art classes	12 (16%)
5.	We can create something cool	12 (16%)
6.	The classes were weird and boring.	3 (4%)

Source: own research.

The children's statements about their willingness to continue the classes were often laconic. As the table shows, for most of them (54 children, 73%), the classes were attractive and interesting; they were described as "cool," and the pupils would like to take part in them more often. Eighteen participants (24%)

also pointed out that it would be beneficial if the classes were held during normal lessons. Interestingly, classes without grades and without imposed hard structures were not treated as “normal” lessons. Seventeen children (23%) noticed that, thanks to these classes, they could get to know each other better. For 12 children (16%), it was important to create something important and interesting. The same number of respondents indicated that they liked artistic activities, which is why they would like to continue to participate in them. Three students (4%), showing passive and negative attitudes during the whole cycle of classes, indicated that the classes were strange and boring for them. However, it can be assumed that the classes seemed difficult and incomprehensible because they touched some problematic areas.

Analyzing the changes taking place in children’s relations and the impact of their participation in the cycle of activities, it is worth looking at the results of the sociometric tests of one of the classes participating in the research. They best illustrate whether participation in classes changed the social structure of the class and allowed peer relations to strengthen between the members of the class group. The first sociometric test was carried out before the beginning of the cycle of classes. It shows the original structure of the class; the second shows the state of peer relations after the end of the cycle of classes.

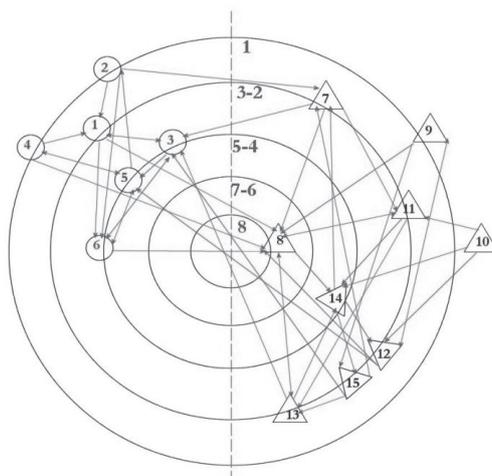


Figure 4.

Results of the first sociometric test carried out in the third class.

Source: own research.

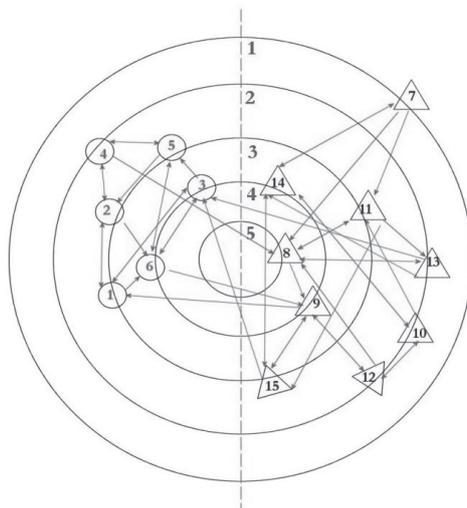


Figure 5.

The results of the second sociometric test carried out in the third class.

Source: own research.

In the discussed class, the highest number of positive indications was given to the boy with the number 8 – he was selected by 8 colleagues. Among the students there was one person – a boy with the number 10 – who in the first study was not picked up once. The graph depicting the original structure of the class does not indicate the existence of closed class groups; one can notice a clear but frequent division by gender in this age. After the classes using art therapy methods, one can see a difference between the graphs. The results of the second test indicate that the person initially rejected in the class obtained 2 votes. Among girls, there was also an increase in typing, that is, the social position of some students improved. This can be seen in the case of girl No. 2; in the first study, she received only one positive indication, while after the participation in the cycle of classes, she received three votes from her colleagues. A big social promotion was also given to the boy with number 9, who in the first study received only one positive indication, and in the next, four. The changes in the children's choices are also noticeable – some of them indicated different children during the second examination than they indicated during the first one. This may be evidence of an emerging openness towards others and the blurring of barriers encountered in the course of the

first classes. It is also possible to lower the disproportion between the person with the highest number of indications and the rest of the class visible on the first chart. However, this does not necessarily indicate a decline in the social attractiveness of the “sociometric star,” but rather a change in the distribution of peer relationships in a given class and the establishment and improvement of relations between some members of the class group.

The sociogram shows the children’s relations in the period shortly following their participation in classes. It is not possible to determine whether these relations remained similar in the longer run. It should also be taken into account that other factors may have influenced the test results, and that the class is a dynamic structure. Nevertheless, participation in art therapy classes stimulated the integration of the class group, which can be considered one of the most important factors conditioning the presented changes.

Conclusion

Several conclusions can be drawn based on the results of the research. First of all, the use of art therapy in the context of peer relations of children at a younger school age is largely possible. It can be used to stimulate many areas of social life. According to the children taking part in this research, as well as the teachers, it is an attractive method of work that is an interesting way for children to convey important content related to their upbringing and, consequently, supports and shapes positive social relations in a class group. It is also important that during classes with elements of art therapy, a safe space for free expression and interaction between members of a given group is created. Eliminating the stress and negative tensions associated with the grading and structuring process encourages students to be active and allows them to share their work without the fear of criticism from the teacher and others. The use of art-therapy elements supports the development of communication between participants of the course. Thanks to this, pupils and students can get to know themselves and others, as well as communicate freely.

The influence of art therapy on the peer relations of children at a younger school age is confirmed by the teachers’ opinions and the results contained in the sociogram, which indicate positive changes in peer relations after participation in the classes. It gave them the opportunity to get to know themselves and their colleagues better during targeted activities, which contributed to the stimulation and improvement of their peer relationships.

The healing power of art has been known to researchers for many years. It affects many spheres of human life. The possibilities offered by this field create new horizons for the use and adaptation of art therapy methods to the specifics of working with children in early school age. Art therapy can help in creating and strengthening children's social skills. Properly used by pedagogues, it can affect children's peer relationships and their functioning in the community.

Participation in activities with elements of art therapy gives pupils the opportunity to open themselves up and express their inner experiences and emotions. This is very important, because today's children prefer to move away from reality, losing their personality in virtual realities. Such a created world and its vision become a barrier for real interpersonal contacts and a threat to shaping systems of values and to building correct reactions to everyday situations.

Perhaps art therapy will be the answer to the widening educational crisis and socio-emotional difficulties in the world of a small child. It is important to bring the methods, techniques and means of art therapy to teachers so that they can use them properly in their work. It should be remembered that when using art therapy, the tasks must be graded properly, and the art forms and tools should be selected wisely and responsibly. It is optimistic that the respondents' declarations voice their willingness to use art therapy. However, it should be remembered that it is important to educate teachers and build their art-therapy awareness, so that the means of artistic expression used bring full-sized benefits.

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