

editorial

Introduction to the Special Issue on Art Therapy in the Schools: Art Therapy + Schools + Students = ?

Susan Loesl, Guest Editorial

Art therapy in the schools. What is it about this statement that evokes such passionate discourse—about art teachers “doing” art therapy in the schools without being trained as art therapists? Art therapists becoming territorial about their techniques? Art teachers feeling that they are in some ways “art therapists,” and the bridge between the two professions looking very murky? Art therapists and art educators work side by side in educational settings but with very different goals. The art therapist may work with specified art therapy groups, provide one-on-one interventions as indicated by students’ Individualized Education Plans, or be called in as a consultant for a student in potential crisis. The art teacher may work with students to develop skills in various media, to understand the elements of art, and to create artwork that not only is reflective of such learning but is also a finished product that can be displayed. Along the way, art images get created that require more than a scholarly critique; art therapists and art educators alike need to be prepared for how best to approach the presented material.

My presence at this year’s National Art Education Association annual convention marked my identity as an art therapist with 21 years of experience working in the Milwaukee Public Schools system with children who have special education needs. As part of collaboration between art therapists and art educators, I led two workshops that explored the interface of our respective work with students. Chatter around the room was lively as previously unexplored commonalities and differences among us became more apparent. With their feet in both worlds, art educator/art therapist presenters led discussions that unfolded perceptions—confirming what some art educators thought about art therapy, dispelling

inaccuracies, and fostering understanding of how far an art educator can go in utilizing art therapy techniques.

Over the subsequent days of the convention, discussions among art therapists and art educators continued, examining what constitutes art therapy in the classroom, what the definition and bounds of art education are, and where the two enterprises blend. Several art educators truly felt that their work incorporated art therapy, as the spontaneous imagery created by their students sometimes brought up suggestible issues. Many art teachers had embraced art therapy by taking classes to gain more experience in art therapy as well as to add “art therapist” to their credentials. The boundaries were fuzzy at times, but as more discussions happened, more clarity seemed to prevail. To some degree, this discourse was not new; nonetheless, it needs to keep flowing if we are to maintain our identities in both professions.

An art teacher/therapist colleague recalled a male high school student who had created a picture in one of her classes that depicted a man pointing a gun directly at the viewer. Because he would not be in class the following day and she felt that the image warranted further attention, the art teacher/therapist immediately sought out the student and asked him to share his image with her. He refused to discuss it, grabbed his backpack, and abruptly walked out of the school. Unfortunately, the situation escalated to the point where the youth, now truant and possibly dangerous to himself or to others, was arrested. In a meeting at the school, his mother asked to see the offending art piece that had caused her son to be arrested. In truth, it wasn’t the art that got him arrested; art was the vehicle that alerted the art teacher/therapist to pursue more information about the intent behind the image that was created. Not long afterward, she learned that the youth was placed in a treatment center on a suicide watch. Clearly, the power of art to bring out a student’s innermost thoughts is something to appreciate and respect.

How do we understand such an image? Would an art teacher have perceived it as a red flag and referred the student to an art therapist or other school counseling support? Or would the artwork simply have been seen as a creative response to a lesson plan prompt? As more art

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educators familiarize themselves with art therapy, I have found that they are increasingly inclined to prevent vulnerable children from slipping through the cracks by changing the once prevalent attitude in the schools of “don’t worry—it’s only a picture.” Art teachers, after all, have a primary vantage point; they constantly observe images created by their students that reveal tidbits of potential crises. It may only be a subtle image slipped into a drawing of a window in a child’s home or it may be a full-blown “in your face” picture of a violent act. But sometimes the art teacher doesn’t feel comfortable dealing with the disturbing image in class, or the school counselor or social worker simply isn’t available. And so the image gets passed over, tucked away in a portfolio, or thrown out.

Art therapy’s beginnings are very much anchored in work with children in the schools. Art teachers who were trained in psychoanalytical theory witnessed children’s traumatic lives through their art and advocated for school-based therapeutic interventions. Due to the nature of art making and the potential ground it offers for unconscious material to be manifested, art teachers have long been concerned about how to deal with a child in crisis within the structure of a school setting. Today, however, only a few school districts employ art therapists, art therapist/art teachers, or adaptive art specialists. Florida art therapists can obtain a teaching credential in school art therapy, but most states do not have such certification. A few states, such as Wisconsin, offer a teaching license in adaptive art, which has met the needs of school districts seeking to hire art therapists as teachers with specialized skills. Some schools hire art therapists as consultants to whom a student can be referred by a school psychologist, a school social worker, or a student’s educational team. Many treatment centers, whether residential or outpatient, have art therapists on staff who function in both art education and art therapy roles.

The articles in this special issue are both a reflection and a response to the challenging issues in the schools that art therapists and art teacher/therapists face. Their stories provide a window into this unique population, whether dealing with issues of confidentiality, practicing therapy within a school or treatment center structure, or dealing with the politics of an educational system whose goals may diverge from those of therapy. The authors share not only their realities but also their visions for the future of art therapy in the schools, enlightening readers regarding the many layered challenges involved in supporting children therapeutically in their educations. From my own perspective as a school art therapist, I know that many families are struggling on a daily basis to survive and I

witness the disheartening impact of family crises on children’s school struggles. One repeating theme in all of this issue’s articles is that our children bring this very heavy baggage to school and then must stuff it into their backpacks for eight hours while they attempt to learn, perform, and relate to peers. We witness, too, the failures of increasingly rigid curricula in the United States in response to the No Child Left Behind Act. Schools are in tough financial straits and budget cuts in the arts are prevalent. Art therapy needs to be promoted as not “just a frill” but a necessary part of any school district’s plan for student success.

However, as the readers will see, this issue also brings to the forefront the many successes of art therapy in the schools. Erin Spier’s study on group adolescent art therapy with eighth graders offers insights into the transition to high school, a period that is now understood to be a critically important time for intervention. She found art therapy to be an effective modality for increasing coping skills and decreasing disruptive behaviors amongst students facing this stressful life change. Cindy Nelson in her article provides important documentation of district-wide efforts of art therapists, music therapists, teachers, and support personnel working in collaboration to provide services to students. Patricia Isis, Janet Bush, Craig Siegel, and Yehoshua Ventura, art therapists from the Miami-Dade County Public Schools Clinical Art Therapy Program, take readers on a journey of the program’s history and development, present realities, and future vision. It is enlightening to see the progress of the program over the years and reassuring that this highly successful model has withstood the test of time. Judy Sutherland, Gwenn Waldman, and Carolyn Collins describe the Art Therapy Connection, a program that supports the mental health needs of urban students attending Chicago public schools. From its beginnings as one art therapist in one school, the program has expanded to serve over 1,000 students.

In my own work as an art therapist and adaptive art specialist, I too have grappled with these issues. Working with other professionals and asserting my identity early on gave me the confidence to promote the potential of art therapy in the educational setting. Interacting with the students taught me when to shift from art therapist to adaptive art teacher, and to check myself when that border felt fuzzy. Such clarity has provided me with the understanding that I share with other professionals in our mutual support of children in need. This special issue highlights the many ways that art therapists can work within the educational setting and heralds how far we have come as a profession with this population.