

USE OF ART THERAPY WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS CHILDREN - RESEARCH ON THE ATTITUDES OF PSYCHOLOGISTS FROM THE MUNICIPALITY OF BLAGOEVGRAD

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Abstract

The study examines the use of art therapy as a therapeutic method for working with children with special educational needs (SEN) in the municipality of Blagoevgrad, focusing on the attitudes of psychologists towards this approach. Art therapy provides alternative forms of expression and emotional support that can be particularly effective for children with SEN for whom traditional methods of communication and therapy do not always produce the desired results. As part of the research, a survey was conducted with psychologists working with children with SEN in various educational and therapeutic institutions in the municipality. The aim is to analyze their attitudes, experiences and perceptions regarding the benefits and challenges of art therapy in the context of working with children with special educational needs. The results show that art therapy is accepted as a useful tool for stimulating the emotional and social development of children, but at the same time requires a broader understanding and additional qualification of specialists in the field. The report concludes with recommendations for the wider use of art therapy and the need for additional training and resources for psychologists working with children with SEN.

Keywords: *Art therapy, children with special educational needs, psychologists, Municipality of Blagoevgrad.*

1. Introduction

Children with special educational needs in Bulgaria face a number of difficulties associated with their adaptation to learning. The usual activities for other children sometimes present a painful experience (Mihaylova, 2017). In modern educational and psychotherapeutic practice, working with children with special educational needs (SEN) requires the use of diverse and innovative approaches that meet the individual needs and characteristics of each child. One of these approaches that is gaining more and more popularity is art therapy. Art therapy as a therapy method, which uses different forms of art - painting, sculpture, collages and others to help children express emotions, develop creativity and cope with difficulties related to socialization and emotional well-being.

In the context of children with SEN, art therapy offers an alternative channel for communication and emotional development, especially for those who experience difficulties with verbal expression. Despite the significant potential of this method, the attitudes and perceptions of professionals working with children with SEN, such as psychologists, play a crucial role in its successful implementation. This report aims to investigate the attitudes of psychologists in Blagoevgrad municipality towards the use of art therapy as an effective tool in their work with children with SEN.

The research will examine what place art therapy occupies in the practice of local psychologists, to what extent they consider it useful and suitable for children with specific educational needs, as well as what the main challenges and barriers to its implementation are.

2. Methodology

For the purposes of the study, two surveys were conducted using the Google Forms platform. The first survey was aimed at parents and addressed the topic: "Investigating Parents' Perceptions of the Benefits and Challenges of Art Therapy for Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN)". The second survey focused on psychology professionals who apply art therapy to children with SEN.

This report presents the results of the second survey, entitled "Investigating the Attitudes of Psychologists Using Art Therapy for Children with SEN". The study involved 30 respondents – practicing

psychologists who apply art therapy methods in their work with children with special educational needs. The survey was conducted electronically, on a voluntary and anonymous basis, which ensures the credibility and free expression of the participants' opinions.

3. Results

To the first question, "How long have you been practicing as a psychologist?", the largest is the percentage of respondents who have 1-5 years of experience (30%), followed by the groups with 6-10 years and 16-20 years of experience (20% each). This shows that a large part of the participants are relatively new to the profession. The distribution of participants is across all possible categories of experience, indicating good performance at various stages of professional development.

When asked "Do you use art therapy in your practice?", 90% of respondents use art therapy in their practice and it is a technique that is popular among them. This may be due to the effectiveness of art therapy as a method of working with patients, especially in the context of psychotherapeutic or counseling practices. The remaining 10% of the respondents use art therapy partially or seldom.

"How do you rate the overall effectiveness of art therapy in working with children with SEN?", the analysis of the survey data shows that art therapy is a highly valued and effective technique when working with children with SEN. A closer look at the results shows the following:

1. Dominant Performance Rating (80%)

The highest percentage of respondents rated art therapy as very effective (rating 4.5). This shows considerable confidence in the therapeutic potential of this technique among specialists. Art therapy clearly figures prominently in their work, possibly being successful in promoting emotional expression, social skill development, and other aspects of the therapeutic process.

2. Average grade (16.7%)

The average rating (3) was given by 16.7% of the respondents. This may reflect the view that art therapy has its limitations in certain cases or with specific children, but is nevertheless a useful tool in practice. These professionals probably use it as an additional technique combined with other methods.

3. Little effective (3.3%)

The small percentage of respondents who rate art therapy as 2 indicates that there are known specialists who do not find it effective enough. This may be due to specific cases of children with SEN who do not respond well to this approach or perhaps to a lack of sufficient experience with the technique.

4. Absence of completely negative evaluations

The lack of respondents who rate art therapy as completely ineffective (rating 1) highlights that even among more skeptical professionals, it is not completely rejected.

The analysis of the data clearly shows that art therapy is perceived as a key and effective method for working with children with SEN, and the majority of specialists rate its role highly. Although there is some variation in evaluations, art therapy continues to be an important resource that is widely applied in practice.

"Which art therapy techniques turn out to be the most effective in your practice?" from the results obtained, it can be seen that the most popular and effective technique used is isotherapy with drawing, modeling with play dough and clay according to 70% of the respondents. Drawing and modeling with play dough and clay allow children to express their emotions and thoughts in a non-verbal way. In the context of art therapy, this type of expression is a powerful tool for self-regulation and emotional support, especially for children with SEN who may experience difficulties in communication.

Next comes music and dance therapy, which was rated as effective by 53.3% of participants. This therapeutic technique is also highly regarded and widely used. Music and dance stimulate motor activity, coordination and socialization while offering opportunities for emotional release and stress reduction. The technique can be used in group or individual therapy, helping to build relationships between children and their therapists.

Story therapy and bibliotherapy (36.7%) are relatively popular among specialists. These techniques use storytelling as a means of dealing with emotional and social challenges. By identifying with characters and situations in fairy tales, children can learn social norms as well as find solutions to their inner conflicts.

Art therapy with wool and other natural materials (33.3%) also has its application, but is less popular compared to other methods. The use of wool and natural materials stimulates children's senses and helps develop fine motor skills. This technique is especially useful for children who need tactile stimulation to focus and calm down.

Less used, but still indicated as effective techniques are sand therapy (23.3%) and theater (13.3%). The data highlight the diversity in professionals' preferences and the high level of trust in different art therapy methods. These results indicate that psychologists prefer techniques that provide flexibility and are easy to adapt to different therapeutic needs of children with SEN.

"Do you use bibliotherapy in your practice?", 40% of the surveyed psychologists actively use bibliotherapy in their practice. This shows that this method is widely accepted and considered effective for working with children with SEN. Bibliotherapy enables children to identify with characters and discover solutions to their own emotional and social problems through literary works. For these professionals, bibliotherapy is an important tool in helping children develop emotional intelligence and cope with stressful situations. The largest percentage of respondents (43.3%) indicated that they use bibliotherapy "somewhat". This may mean that although they are familiar with the methodology and apply it in some cases, they do not use it as a primary or regular tool. It is possible to integrate bibliotherapy in combination with other methods or to use it only in specific cases, as an additional approach to work with children. This indicates that the potential of bibliotherapy is recognized but may need greater implementation or resources for wider use. A small part of the respondents (16.7%) stated that they do not use bibliotherapy in their practice. This may be due to several factors, such as a lack of sufficient knowledge of this method, limited resources or a preference for other therapeutic approaches. Psychologists in this group may not see bibliotherapy as appropriate for their particular cases or may feel that other methods are more effective for the children they work with.

Bibliotherapy is a widely used and valuable method, with the majority of respondents (83.3%) applying it fully or partially. This shows positive attitudes towards the method and potential for its even wider implementation in practice with children with SEN.

The analysis of the answers shows a variety of difficulties that professionals face when working with children with SEN. Here are the key aspects that stand out:

1. Individuality of challenges: "There are always challenges, they are case-by-case." This response emphasizes that each child with SEN is unique, and challenges vary according to their individual needs. Psychologists and therapists must adapt their methods, taking into account the specific characteristics of the child - be it communication difficulties, behavioral problems or motor skills.

2. Problems with concentration and attention: "Difficulty holding attention for a longer period" and "Keeping children's attention and engagement during art therapy". One of the main challenges in art therapy is related to the difficulty of holding children's attention for a long enough time. Especially for children with autism, ADHD or other cognitive difficulties, the problem of concentration can be a significant obstacle. This requires therapists to constantly adapt materials and techniques to maintain children's interest.

3. Behavioral and communication difficulties: "Behavioral problems" and "Communication and behavioral difficulties". Children with SEN often have difficulties in social interaction and communication, which can make the art therapy process difficult. This can make the therapeutic process more difficult and require extra effort to create a safe and supportive environment.

4. Difficulties in motor and fine motor skills: "Fine motor skills are challenging for some children in drawing activities, etc.". Children with SEN often have difficulty with fine motor skills, especially in activities involving drawing, modeling or other manual tasks. This can limit their ability to actively participate in some types of art therapy and necessitates the use of adapted materials or activities that stimulate fine motor development.

5. Initial predisposition and adaptation: "Children's predisposition to the various activities they are just being introduced to". Some children may resist new activities or have difficulty adapting to unfamiliar materials or work methods. This requires therapists to carefully plan and gradually introduce new techniques to reduce stress and stimulate children's participation.

6. Difficulties in expressing emotions: "Difficulty expressing emotions". Art therapy is often used as a way to non-verbally express emotions, but for some children this can be challenging. Children with SEN may have difficulty understanding and expressing their emotions appropriately, making therapy more difficult and requiring additional effort on the part of the therapist.

7. Selection of materials and methods: "Selecting Appropriate Materials" and "Colors". Selecting materials is an important aspect of art therapy. Therapists must carefully select materials so that they are appropriate for the child's abilities and needs.

8. Building Trust: "Building trust!" Working with children with SEN requires long-term trust building between the child and the therapist. The process can be lengthy and requires patience, especially for children with more severe disorders who need more time to become comfortable in the therapeutic environment.

9. Resistance from parents: "Resistance from parents." In some cases, parents may show resistance or uncertainty about using art therapy. This requires therapists to work not only with children but also with parents to explain the benefits and reduce resistance.

General conclusions: concentration and attention are the most common challenges mentioned by specialists, who emphasize the need to adapt methods to keep children interested. Communication and behavioral difficulties are often a barrier to achieving effectiveness in therapy, which necessitates the

integration of additional strategies to deal with these problems. Motor skills and the expression of emotions also present a challenge that requires an individualized approach and appropriately selected techniques. Interaction with parents is also an important aspect to be addressed in order to reduce resistance and provide support for the therapeutic process. These challenges highlight the importance of flexibility and an individualized approach when applying art therapy to children with SEN.

The question "How do you think art therapy affects the social skills of children with SEN?" shows the majority of specialists (80%) rated the impact of art therapy on social skills as high or very high. Some of them give an average rating, which shows that some professionals see moderate effectiveness. The percentage of those who think that art therapy has low effectiveness in this area is very small (3.3%).

To the next question, "Do you notice improvements in the emotional state of children with SEN after art therapy sessions? Please give examples", analysis of observations on the effect of art therapy sessions on children with SEN shows the following main trends and improvements:

1. Improving the emotional state: children become calmer, more confident and in a better mood. Many of them manage to express their emotions more easily through creative processes such as drawing and modeling with clay. Children with autism show progress in expressing emotions through art, while children with ADHD show improvements in concentration and self-control.

2. Improving social interactions: after art therapy sessions, children often become more open to communication and freer self-expression. This leads to better social skills and interactions with their peers.

3. Strengthening self-esteem and confidence: art therapy stimulates children to feel significant and confident by providing them with an opportunity to express themselves and create. Participation in creative processes helps develop their emotional intelligence and creativity.

4. Development of cognitive and motor skills: activities stimulate mental development and improve fine motor skills, especially in children with mental retardation. They also develop teamwork skills.

5. Stimulating interest and attention: art therapy keeps children's attention and motivates them to actively participate in the process, leading to greater concentration and engagement.

The survey reveals the positive influence of art therapy on the social skills of children with SEN. Most respondents noticed that children became calmer, sociable and confident. Art therapy has improved children's concentration, emotional intelligence and self-esteem. Experts note that children express their feelings more easily and show progress in social relationships. These positive changes greatly aid their daily life and social interactions.

To the question "How do you think art therapy helps children express their feelings?" according to the respondents, art therapy helps children express their emotions and feelings in a creative and safe way, using art as a means of visual and symbolic expression. This approach is especially helpful for children who have difficulty sharing their feelings verbally. An important benefit of art therapy is that it provides a safe environment in which children can explore their emotions without fear of judgment. Through techniques such as drawing, modeling and other forms of creative expression, children can express inner feelings and experiences that would otherwise remain suppressed or misunderstood. Art therapy also develops children's motor skills while promoting discipline and focus, especially in children with SEN. According to the responses received, art therapy is a means of emotional balance and development, giving children new techniques of expression and opportunities to reveal and analyze hidden emotions through their works.

To the question "What additional resources or trainings do you think would be useful to improve your art therapy practice?" according to the respondents, a number of additional resources, trainings and approaches can be used that contribute to more effective expression of feelings and emotions in children. Here are the main aspects that would be helpful:

Additional materials and resources: access to a variety of art materials (didactic materials, puppets, models, natural materials) is essential. They provide children with various opportunities for creative expression. In addition, the need for greater financial resources for consumables was cited as an important factor in securing adequate materials.

Training and professional development: exchange of experience with colleagues, as well as participation in additional training and seminars, are key to improving practice. Training in specific art therapy techniques and methods for working with children with SEN would be particularly useful.

Practical experience and observations: direct observation of other professionals and exchange of experiences with colleagues, including those trained abroad, would also enrich art therapy practice. The inclusion of new techniques and methodologies, as well as meta-communication, can contribute to a better relationship with children.

Working with natural elements and relaxation: art therapy combined with nature activities and relaxation exercises can help to further calm and stimulate the creative process. Natural materials offer unique opportunities to connect with children's emotions.

Modern technologies: the use of software applications and digital tools for art therapy opens up new possibilities for working with children. Technology can complement traditional methods by providing new ways of expression and engagement.

Working with parents and the family: involving parents through training or workshops can create a better supportive environment for children.

Other techniques and methods: the inclusion of bibliotherapy, stories and picture books offers additional forms of emotional expression and expands the possibilities for interpretation of children's experiences.

In summary, improving art therapy practice requires a combination of access to additional materials, training in new techniques, sharing experiences with colleagues, and using modern technologies. This would lead to a more effective application of art therapy and better support for children in expressing their feelings and emotions.

"Would you recommend art therapy as a work approach to other professionals (educators, social workers, etc.) who work with children with SEN?", 90% of respondents would recommend art therapy, which confirms confidence in the approach to working with children with SEN. The reservations are minimal, and the absence of low ratings confirms the positive perception of art therapy among professionals.

"In your opinion, are art therapy techniques actively used by specialists in Bulgaria?", the results show a division among specialists in Bulgaria regarding the active use of art therapy techniques. According to the survey, 46.7% answered with "Definitely yes", indicating that almost half of the professionals actively apply art therapy in their work. On the other hand, 53.3% of professionals responded with "Definitely no", indicating that more than half do not actively use art therapy. This may be due to several factors: lack of training in art therapy methods, lack of resources, insufficient awareness of the benefits of art therapy or other priorities in their work.

4. Conclusion

"In art therapy children have the opportunity to express meaning, emotions and experiences through creating a tangible product. Psychomotor activities such as drawing, coloring, and working with clay/play dough involve all senses, including vision, touch and sound - depending on the materials being used. Art therapy promotes creativity, self-awareness, self-esteem, communication skills, and overall personality and psychomotor development" (Bojadjeva & Gradinarova, 2016).

According to the conducted study, experts believe that art therapy has significant potential to help children express their emotions and feelings, but its application in Bulgaria is uneven. Despite the recognized benefits and active use by almost half of the specialists (46.7%), the majority (53.3%) do not actively apply art therapy techniques.

This result highlights the need for additional training and resources, as well as greater funding for materials to facilitate the implementation of these methodologies. Specialists who apply art therapy note its positive effect on children, as it provides a safe environment for visual and symbolic expression of emotions, develops creativity and improves motor skills.

Modern technologies and digital tools for art therapy are highlighted as the main factors for improving the practice. Involving parents and enriching therapeutic techniques with different methodologies would also help the wider application of these approaches.

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