

Exploring the Application of Art Therapy in Primary School Fine Arts and Calligraphy Education

Rongbing Lin^{1,a,*}

¹*Fuzhou Cangshan District Sixth Central Primary School, Maipu Road 16, Cangshan District, Fuzhou City, Fujian Province, China*

a. 44437322@qq.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Art therapy typically utilizes visual art forms such as painting, sculpture, dance, and drama as mediums. By creating art pieces, it helps students understand emotional conflicts, enhance self-awareness, manage behavior, reduce stress, and alleviate emotions. Integrating the content of art therapy into fine arts and calligraphy classes, and even collaborating with dedicated psychology teachers for promotion and psychological guidance, achieves therapeutic effects, effectively alleviating various pressures and psychological issues in primary school students.

Keywords: Art therapy, fine arts, calligraphy, painting analysis, project-based learning

1. Introduction

Adolescents are the future of the world, and the mental and physical health of adolescents cannot be ignored. According to the 2022 "China National Mental Health Development Report (2021~2022)," the adolescent group has a 14.8% risk of depression to varying degrees, higher than the adult group, requiring effective intervention and timely adjustment. In recent years, art therapy has become popular and developed in China. In fact, as early as the 1950s and 1960s, art therapy was used in Western countries to treat various psychological illnesses and disorders, achieving significant results. The World Health Organization also supports art therapy, believing that painting can help children regulate their emotions. This paper mainly discusses the popularization of art therapy in primary school fine arts and calligraphy education, in response to the new curriculum's project-based learning concept, integrating interdisciplinary research in psychology, health education, and medicine. The goal is to implement effective psychological intervention for adolescents as early as possible, reducing the risk of mental and psychological disorders in this age group.

2. The Significance of Introducing Art Therapy into Primary School Campuses

In recent years, there has been a surge in psychological and mental issues among primary school students, with a persistent high rate of academic disinterest. Results from various surveys on psychological stress and mental health problems among primary school students reveal a diverse range of stressors in today's society, including the COVID-19 pandemic, extracurricular tutoring, family factors, and academic pressures. These stressors are accompanied by varying degrees of anxiety, depression, withdrawal, violent tendencies, and even instances of suicide. Primary school students are

at a crucial stage of individual physical and mental development, characterized by weak emotional self-control, blurred rationality and sensibility, and poor psychological stability. Due to their young age and high plasticity, early guidance and intervention can effectively reduce the risk of various psychological disorders and issues [1]. While psychological health courses are implemented in primary schools, there is a shortage of school psychologists in some schools, with some lacking dedicated staff altogether. Therefore, it is not feasible to rely solely on professional psychologists to address students' mental health issues. On the other hand, art education in primary schools is relatively well-established, with art courses already covering various schools. The importance of art education was clearly emphasized in the "Opinions on Comprehensive Strengthening and Improvement of School Arts Education Work" issued by the State Council of China in 2015. Art education not only enhances aesthetic literacy but also subtly influences individuals' emotions, interests, temperament, and broadens their minds. This aligns with the principles of art therapy.

The split-brain experiments conducted by American neurophysiologist Sperry suggest that the left hemisphere of the human brain handles language-related content, while the right hemisphere processes visual perception analysis, emotional expression, and artistic talent. The right hemisphere, which governs art and emotions, is more adept at expressing people's underlying psychological emotions. Looking at the history of art development, art itself serves as a means of expression beyond language, acting as a bridge to extend emotional expression and establish communication with the outside world. Therefore, using non-verbal methods such as art and calligraphy allows for communication with students that transcends language, age, and cognitive levels, enabling the expression of subconscious content and reflecting students' inner emotional states, leading to release and self-healing.

Art therapy typically employs visual art forms such as painting, sculpture, dance, and drama as mediums, and the art discipline itself involves visual forms like painting and sculpture [2]. By creating artworks, students can better understand emotional conflicts, enhance self-awareness, manage behavior, reduce stress, and alleviate emotions. Research indicates that the process of painting activates parts of the human brain associated with pleasurable activities and reward sensations. Art therapy, through painting, has shown significant therapeutic effects in improving mood, addressing anxiety and depression, enhancing social interactions, improving learning experiences, promoting self-esteem development, self-discovery, and self-improvement. We integrate the content of art therapy into art and calligraphy classes, even collaborating with dedicated psychology teachers for promotion and psychological guidance, achieving therapeutic effects and effectively alleviating various pressures and psychological issues among primary school students.

3. The Theoretical Basis of Art Therapy in Primary School Campuses

3.1. Basic Principles of Art Therapy

Art therapy is described as "an expressive therapeutic modality." According to the American Art Therapy Association, art therapy is a form of psychotherapy primarily targeting individuals who have suffered psychological trauma or face psychological difficulties. It aims to improve participants' physiological, psychological, and emotional well-being through the creative process of art [2]. This paper extends the scope of art therapy to primary school students, not limited to those already diagnosed with mental or psychological disorders. It focuses on two art forms, namely visual arts and calligraphy, using painting analysis and psychotherapy as mediums for discussion.

3.2. Feasibility of Implementing Art Therapy through Fine Arts and Calligraphy Disciplines

Psychologist Carl Jung developed art therapy using drawing psychotherapy and self-healing techniques through the creation of Mandalas. In his psychological theory, consciousness is divided into personal consciousness, personal unconscious, and collective unconscious. Personal

consciousness, also known as the "ego," encompasses elements directly known to an individual, such as cognition, sensation, thoughts, and memories. Personal unconscious, or the "id," comprises elements that were once conscious or always unconscious, suppressed, forgotten parts. Collective unconscious, referred to as the "super-ego," involves collective experiences of humanity and pre-human collectives, representing the deepest and least easily accessible layer. Conflict between an individual's personal consciousness and personal unconscious can lead to symptoms such as anxiety, stress, depression, and psychosis. Carl Jung believed that "through images, the most basic levels of human experience and psychological life can be expressed." Thus, through visual arts and calligraphy, the hidden personal unconscious can be stimulated, enabling the retrieval of past psychological issues and expressing repressed impulses and inner conflicts, externalizing problems and paving the way for acknowledgment, change, and self-reconciliation.

Margaret Naumburg, one of the founders of art therapy, introduced "dynamic-oriented art therapy" based on Sigmund Freud's unconscious theory. She believed that unconscious psychological problems could be expressed through painting art. "Developmental art therapy" is based on child psychological development theory, suggesting that painting art can promote cognitive and emotional development in children. "Humanistic-oriented painting psychotherapy" follows humanistic thought, using painting to enter the unconscious, soothe emotions, resolve psychological conflicts, and help students understand, accept, and integrate themselves [3]. In other words, engaging in creative work in art classes not only enhances cognitive skills and raises cognitive levels but also allows students to vent their unconscious psychological activities positively, enabling proactive intervention in a creative manner.

Chinese calligraphy, as a unique art form, has long been renowned worldwide. German sinologist Lothar Ledderose believes that Western abstract expressionism is influenced by Chinese calligraphy art. He stated, "Excellent Chinese calligraphy is a product that naturally overflows under the best creative conditions and is a unique visual symbol with a distinctive charm." American artist Pollock incorporated Chinese cursive script into his creations. Chinese calligraphy is not only an artistic expression but also a contemplation and communication of life, nature, and society, providing profound artistic enjoyment and humanistic care. During the Han Dynasty, Yang Xiong stated in "Fayan Wenshen," (《法言·问神》) "Calligraphy is drawing from the heart." Calligraphy is the expression of a calligrapher's inner emotions, using not only written language for exposition but also artistic lines to depict the "heart," breaking away from representation to truly reach a state of the "super-ego." Modern medical research indicates that writing balances the excitation and inhibition functions of the brain's cortex, especially cursive script, which, with its unrestrained style, bold strokes, and continuous swirling, can release emotions, stimulate hidden feelings, and have effects such as concentrating attention, regulating emotions, relieving stress, and enhancing perceptual sensitivity and activating cognition [4].

4. Implementation of Art Therapy in Primary School Campuses: Specific Methods

4.1. Utilizing Art Therapy for Screening and Establishing Student Psychological Archives

Currently, schools in China have consciously started to establish psychological archives for students, aiming to grasp and understand the mental health status of each student on campus. However, the majority of these efforts involve using surveys and questionnaires, employing a relatively singular approach to comprehensive assessment. Introducing the concept of art therapy can enhance the screening process through the method of painting analysis, contributing to the improvement of psychological archives. This approach is based on Freud's psychoanalytic theory and can project a series of psychological characteristics such as intelligence, behavior, emotions, personality, and socialization from the artist. It serves as a complementary tool for the student psychological archives within schools. Additionally, specialized archives focusing on aspects requiring further attention in art

therapy can be established, although these archives are not disclosed to the public. This provides a foundation and direction for developing distinctive art therapy courses in each school and serves as a practical case for the development and research of art therapy.

4.2. Integration into Primary School Art and Calligraphy Courses

In the current stage, primary schools in China have fully implemented art and calligraphy courses. By infusing the foundational principles of art therapy into daily teaching practices and combining them with extracurricular activities, school-based courses, afternoon and evening programs, and interest clubs, a more in-depth implementation can be achieved. Primary school art and calligraphy courses primarily focus on two main aspects: creation and appreciation.

4.2.1. Achieving Therapeutic Effects through Creating Art and Calligraphy Works

The creative process of art and calligraphy can train students' attention, abstract and visual thinking abilities, and imagination. In the process of creation, the construction of the artwork and self-construction occur simultaneously. This means that students, through the creative process, engage in self-discovery and self-awareness, correcting any inconsistent perceptions, releasing stress, and relaxing both body and mind. Through art and calligraphy courses, students can express, communicate, and release their emotions [5]. In both Chinese literati painting and Western expressionism, painting is detached from practical functionality and depicting the objective world. Inspired by Freudian psychology, surrealism in art emphasizes the emotional expression of the artist. For instance, Chagall depicted his dreams in his paintings. A lesson in primary school art textbooks, such as "Unusual Dreams," allows teachers to guide children to draw their dreams, and even "dreams in their hearts." Freud believed that dreams are a manifestation of the subconscious. By drawing dreams and establishing a connection with the unconscious, individuals can understand their inner world and achieve self-harmony.

The primary school curriculum includes many courses suitable for implementing art therapy. Teachers can select popular art therapy techniques and integrate them with course themes. For art courses, lessons such as "New Friends," "Drawing Cartoons for Classmates," and "Drawing Figures with Lines" can be combined with painting analysis and psychological therapy techniques like self-portraits, tree-people-house dynamics, etc., to help students understand themselves, improve social interactions, and enhance family relationships [6]. Other suitable courses include pattern-themed lessons like "Wonderful Concentric Circles" and "Patterns for You," combined with Mandala therapy. These courses use patterns to draw Mandala, transforming chaos into order and promoting dialogue between students and their own subconscious. The aim is to reach a state of tranquility through exploring and releasing stress [6]. Moreover, courses focusing on color, such as "Colorful Family" and "Amazing Pointillism," can employ psychological analysis and therapy related to painting colors. While colors themselves lack emotions, individuals can perceive emotional qualities such as warmth, weight, softness, brightness, melancholy, excitement, and calmness. These qualities have certain effects on relieving fatigue and eliminating negative emotions. Lastly, courses centered around emotional expression, such as "We Paint and Evaluate" and "Happy Childhood in the Eyes of Artists," combine theory and practice. Before painting, students learn theoretical knowledge about painting, specific features of objects in paintings, and symbolic meanings. Then, without restricting students, they are allowed to freely express their feelings. This approach combines with the "random painting" technique in painting analysis and psychological therapy, encouraging students to create based on their current thoughts, emotions, and psychological states. Alternatively, even without mentioning any painting theory, a few simple prompts are sufficient to start the creative process. This approach aligns with the modern trend of "primitive art," freeing individuals from traditional art constraints and

respecting their innermost feelings, releasing the primal impulses within themselves. Jean Dubuffet, the founder of primitive art, once said, "They call for the essence of humanity and the most natural and individual expression; primitive artists never consider rules and mainstream, drawing creative energy entirely from their own instincts and inspirations. Expressing individual subconsciousness through non-verbal forms, shedding light on the subconscious, aids in self-reconstruction and integration, contributing to maintaining psychological health" [5]

Regarding calligraphy courses, the practical functionality of Chinese calligraphy has gradually distanced itself from us, but it still receives admiration and love from many people, not only for its artistic value but also for its healing function. The ancient saying goes: "Learning calligraphy nourishes the heart, heals ailments, and brings joy to the gentleman." Therefore, we can achieve this through: 1 Copying Masterpieces: Calligraphy has five styles, which further branch into numerous calligraphic styles. Practicing calligraphy involves choosing a preferred style and copying the works of favorite calligraphers. This process can awaken an individual's collective subconscious, allowing dialogue between oneself, the author, and the primal beauty. For instance, regular script embodies an orderly beauty. Practicing regular script cultivates concentration and patience, attributing haste to slowness, complexity to calmness. On the other hand, cursive script embodies the artistic conception. Cursive script carries the emotions and feelings, thoughts, and consciousness of the writer, enabling the release of various emotions and stress. Through calligraphy techniques, disorder and change are transformed into order, harmonizing the body and mind – a concept similar to "drawing after being natural" and Mandala therapy. 2 Attempting Calligraphy: Calligraphy can be used for expressive or free-form writing. It allows individuals to express and write down their emotions through others' writings, or create their own compositions. This approach achieves the effects of awareness, discovery, self-adjustment, reconciliation, and ultimately, healing the mind. Masterpieces like Wang Xizhi's "Preface to the Poems Composed at the Orchid Pavilion" (《兰亭序》) and Yan Zhenqing's "Draft for Memorial Ceremony for Nephew" (《祭侄文稿》) serve as excellent evidence.

4.2.2. Achieving Therapeutic Effects through Appreciating Art and Calligraphy Works

Carl Jung's concept of collective unconsciousness allows teachers to incorporate the content of art therapy into appreciation classes within art courses: 1 Carl Jung posited that people share common experiences from primitive human history and, to some extent, resonate with beauty, collectively experiencing empathy toward certain emotions expressed in paintings and calligraphy. Therefore, during the appreciation of artworks, students are moved, infected, and influenced, leading to a sense of inner tranquility. 2 In general, during appreciation classes, the life stories of artists are introduced, allowing students to understand the lives of these painters and calligraphers. This deeper understanding aids in quantifying the previously established "empathy" and, consequently, comprehending the reasons behind being moved, achieving self-awareness, self-acceptance, and returning to a state of calmness.

For example, when appreciating Vincent van Gogh's works, viewers may be captivated by the vibrant and lively colors of plants and landscapes, as well as the swirling and flowing brushstrokes. However, when observing van Gogh's self-portraits, viewers often encounter faces expressing melancholy, vacancy, loneliness, and peculiarity (such as the self-inflicted ear injury). Through appreciation, one can comprehend the stories behind these faces, understand why van Gogh did not paint himself as beautifully and vivaciously as his landscapes, and learn about his pain and abnormalities. This exploration reveals that even individuals with remarkable artistic talent have wounded hearts, emphasizing the imperfection of humanity. However, discovering one's passion allows for a carefree existence, akin to the "idle person" described by Su Shi, who, despite life's challenges, became a great literary figure, poet, and calligrapher.

Art appreciation activities fulfill students' aesthetic needs. Through art appreciation, students can gain a deeper understanding of the beauty of nature, society, history, and life. Artworks encapsulate an artist's understanding, perception, and aesthetic ideals of life. They can strongly influence and enlighten the viewer, providing spiritual enjoyment and aesthetic pleasure, allowing the mind and body to experience joy and relaxation. As Chinese painter Lin Fengmian stated, "Beauty is like the most affectionate lady on Earth. Whenever someone carries any sadness, she will instantly fulfill their wishes, providing warmth and comfort effortlessly."

5. Conclusion

In summary, integrating art therapy into the disciplines of primary school fine arts and calligraphy can address the issue of insufficient deployment of dedicated school psychologists. This integration plays a crucial role in the timely identification and effective intervention for students with existing psychological issues or potential concerns, thus allowing art education to genuinely nurture the mind. Simultaneously, it facilitates the integration between various disciplines, encourages project-based teaching methods, and explores more diverse teaching models, ensuring students truly benefit from the educational experience.

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