

Group arts therapy with early adolescents with attention, learning and behavioural difficulties: A case study

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ABSTRACT

Four children aged 11 to 12 completed a series of six arts therapy sessions as part of an explorative case study of early adolescents with attention, learning and behavioural difficulties within a school environment. The research was conducted from a phenomenological perspective so as to identify the children's perceptions of the difficulties they encounter in their daily lives. Data collection for this case study consisted of semi-structured interviews, observational notes, video recording, diary-keeping and artwork collected from the sessions. A quantitative element was introduced by way of pre and post-intervention questionnaires for the teachers. The intervention, which was largely directive in nature, included the focusing of tasks to address inattention and combined art and drama to address behavioural difficulties. While this was a small-scale case study, there are indications that the use of expressive modalities may benefit school-age children with these deficits.

INTRODUCTION

Group work serves many functions and offers enormous potential for growth, both for the individual and collectively. Rose & Edleson (1987 cited in Geldard & Geldard, 2001) draw attention to the power of children's groups in promoting change in individual members and point out that in groups "children learn by interacting with, observing and listening to peers" (p.4).

According to Geldard & Geldard (2001), a group can provide a sense of belonging, which in turn motivates children to work together and to pursue common goals. By adding the element of play and expressive arts to this mix we have, potentially, a recipe for transformation and an environment that is conducive to achieving positive outcomes for the individuals within such groups.

I first became interested in conducting research with a group of school-age children when I read about the concept of 'mini-groups' and

examples of positive interventions with groups of children utilising art therapy. Riley (1999) suggests that there are many children in schools who are labelled with attention-deficit/hyperactive disorder (ADHD) and that these children are often difficult to handle in the classroom. According to Riley, "if they do concentrate, even for a short period of time, they benefit" (p.105). In Britain, where art therapy has been integrated into mainstream education, Riley has observed that creating small groups of three or four children with similar problems has been very successful. In these mini-groups the art therapist sets tasks and adopts a more or less directive approach to the intervention, with a view to encouraging behaviour modification.