

Art Therapy Working in Schools

Mount Lebanon School District, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Art Expression Incorporated- An Innovative School Based Approach — Lisa Wright MA, ATR-BC



The field of art therapy is a developing entity that is constantly changing and creating unique ways to help people using art as a life enhancing medium. A relatively new program which utilizes components of art therapy to help children in a school setting is called Art Expression, Incorporated. It is an inclusive after school social skills program that utilizes group therapy techniques and art. It is taught by certified art therapists, school counselors, learning support teachers, teachers, and volunteers at the elementary and middle school levels. The program also provides opportunities for high school students to volunteer as mentors for younger peers.

James and Angela Lowden established a foundation supporting the visual arts in 2001. The foundation was created as a result of Angela Lowden's love of children and her passion for art. The Lowdens then partnered with Mt. Lebanon School District, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to complete their vision of the program. The unique qualities of the Art Expression program are that it was fully funded and created by the Lowdens in collaboration with the Mt. Lebanon School District. Due to the great success of the Art Expression program, the Mt. Lebanon School District has implemented the program in seven elementary schools and two middle schools. In 2007, Mt. Lebanon School District agreed to share the expenses related to the program through the 2009-2011 school years.

As a result of its successes Art Expression became a nonprofit organization in 2007. Its goal is to expand the program to reach more children. Currently, Art Expression is conducted in two school systems and the organization has been contacted by others who have expressed interest in implementing the program in the coming school year.

At the outset of fall and spring term, an introductory letter is sent to the parents of a specific grade level. A meeting occurs between school faculty and parents to review the

program as well as complete the proper paperwork, including releases for artwork. The program runs from approximately 3:30 until 5:00 pm one day a week for six weeks. The average size of the groups varies; however it has been found to be most effective with small groups of 12 to 15 students. Art Expression is an inclusive program; students are enrolled from both regular and special education classrooms. Special education students include those having various needs, most importantly the need for positive social skills in a group setting. Regular education students may also demonstrate a need for positive social skills development.

Goals



The five primary goals of the Art Expression program are addressed over each six week session through selected art activities. These goals are enforced, evaluated, and encouraged with each student interaction in every session.

Goal 1 - To demonstrate an increase in self-esteem, as evidenced by positive statements about oneself and one's work along with regular self-assessment of personal accomplishments.

Goal 2 – To develop and enhance social skills through group participation. The art therapist reinforces students' demonstration of respect by sharing materials, ideas, and personal space.

Goal 3 – To utilize problem-solving strategies to reach an appropriate resolution, as it relates to projects and interactions. This is achieved by showing the ability to identify and communicate a problem, create an appropriate plan of response, attempt the plan and/or seek assistance, and evaluate the outcome.

Goal 4 – To demonstrate an increase in tolerance for frustrations experienced in a group setting. The art therapist and school faculty encourage students to recognize and communicate the onset and cause of the frustration and use problem-solving strategies to help them manage.

Goal 5 - To encourage the students to establish independence by putting themselves forward in an appropriate manner, which includes self-initiated appropriate leadership within the group.

Structure

The Art Expression program has an elementary and middle school format. The elementary format is directive in nature. The art therapist develops directives to address the five program goals. Some effective directives used include murals on a variety of topics, worry beads, hope boxes, and construction of doodle diaries. Keeping in mind the goals of the program, the creation of masks have been found to be effective with students. In one such project, students were randomly assigned a feeling and then

created an emotive mask which expressed this feeling using plastic milk containers, paper-mache, paint, and various materials.

The middle school program is based upon an open studio approach. The students use a self-directive method to meet the goals of the program. The art therapist helps the students by assisting with technical difficulties, guiding students in brainstorming project ideas, and encouraging interaction between peers. Approaches in both elementary and middle school levels focus on the process of creating art rather than the final product.

Testimonial: Elliot's Story

Elliot, a fourth grade transfer student from a local school, was quiet, reserved, and appeared to carry the weight of the world on his shoulders. With his school counselor's encouragement, Elliot joined the Art Expression. During one particular session, the students' project was to create a family crest. This project called for cardboard and drawing materials. Elliot created a pizza for his family crest. When asked why he created a pizza, Elliot stated, "My father has a brain tumor and my mother has to work two jobs; sometimes I have to cook dinner, I'm not a very good cook but I do make great pizza." The class and staff then knew Elliot's story.

Final Thoughts

Art Expression is an opportunity for personal expression. A variety of students may benefit from this program ranging from those who simply need opportunities by assisting with technical difficulties, guiding students in brainstorming project ideas, and encouraging interaction between peers. Approaches in both elementary and middle school levels focus on the process of creating art rather than the final product. For more information, please visit Art Expression Incorporated's web site at www.artexpressioninc.org or email Lisa Wright at lwright580@hotmail.com.



A variety of students may benefit from this program ranging from those who simply need opportunities to learn about themselves to those who are disconnected and may resort to violence in the academic environment.

Hays Consolidated Independent School District, Kyle, Texas

Special Education Psychological Services — Megan L. Van Meter, MA, LPC Intern ATR-BC



Under the auspices of special education psychological services, art therapy is provided to students in the Hays Consolidated Independent School District just south of Austin, Texas. Megan Van Meter, a registered and board-certified art therapist, has been working there since 2005 and steadily increasing awareness about art therapy while developing the art therapy program within the district. She serves the K-12 population through individual and group sessions as well as through consultations with teachers, staff, administrators, parents/guardians, and external healthcare providers and organizations.

Most of the students who receive art therapy services qualify for special education via an emotional disturbance that interferes with their ability to function effectively in the classroom. Before being formally evaluated for art therapy services, a student must have received prior psychological assistance through school-based means and/or external providers or organizations but continues to demonstrate significant emotional-behavioral problems in the academic setting. Students who qualify for art therapy services work on goals and objectives that are evaluation-driven and address the issues that compromise their role as students.

Art therapy is uniquely suited to meet the needs of this population because of its capacity to provide an experiential opportunity to express, explore, and master mental processes that can be difficult to put into words due to a student's developmental level, severity of emotional dysregulation, and/or history of pre-verbal trauma. Challenges can be minimized, strengths can be maximized, and students can return to the classroom ready to learn.



**Special Education Art Therapy and Special Education — Megan L. Van Meter, MA,
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Art therapists who are interested in working in the public schools might find it helpful to understand the special education system and how art therapy services can be utilized in a special education setting. A good place to start with is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, a 1990 federal law (reauthorized in 1997 and again in 2004) that ensures a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment to all youth regardless of ability. This act allows for the provision of special education services to address deficits or challenges that severely affect a student's classroom performance.



Students who are tested and qualified for special education services have demonstrated educational deficits or challenges in one or more of the following areas: autism, deaf/blind, deafness, hearing impaired, mentally challenged, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, serious emotional disturbance, specific learning disabilities, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury, visual impairment including blindness, and other health impairment. Due to the nature of these conditions and their adverse affect on the learning process, students who qualify for special education services are provided with an individualized education plan (IEP) to address their specific needs as they relate to the goals of an educational setting. Services that are recommended in a student's IEP both directly or indirectly strive to improve a student's classroom performance and are monitored by the service provider(s) and a committee to ensure that the student is making progress. Related services fall under this category in that they indirectly support a student's educational process by addressing problems that serve as barriers to it; in other words, these services relate to a student's academic performance.



Art therapy as a related service involves the provision of interventive assistance that addresses a particular student's qualifications for special education services (i.e., autism, emotional disturbance, learning disabilities, etc.) in order to promote the student's ability to function effectively in the classroom. Because a student is pulled from the classroom for art therapy sessions, art therapy as a related service is considered restrictive in that it restricts a student's instructional time. For that reason art therapy as a related service is reserved for special education students who are experiencing a long-standing issue that warrants intervention; special education

students who are experiencing a short-term need are not appropriate referrals for art therapy as a related service. Before a committee can recommend art therapy as a related service, written parental or guardian consent must be obtained to evaluate the student for this service. The evaluation results yield treatment goals if a student qualifies for art therapy as a related service, and the evaluation and goals are reviewed with the referring committee and parents/guardians/student prior to formally recommending art therapy as a related service in the student's IEP.



Once a service has been formally recommended in the IEP, the school district must provide that service. This is true even if the student moves to a new district; the receiving district is legally required to implement the student's existing IEP until the new district has become familiar with the student and reevaluates/reassesses her or his needs. Student progress toward related service goals are monitored by the service provider at regular intervals and reviewed by a committee at least once per year to determine their relevance to the student's overall performance. A student who has achieved her or his related services goals may be dismissed from that particular service via committee approval. Otherwise she or he must be reevaluated for that service at

least once every three years in order to determine continued eligibility.



On the other hand, enrichment services are for special education students as a means of supplementing or enhancing their educational experience. Enrichment services are not IEP driven and thus do not require an evaluation process or the development and monitoring of treatment goals. However, it is advisable to

obtain written parental/guardian consent for each student, as parents and guardians have a right to know—and to object—when a school district is offering an enrichment service to their children. Enrichment services generally are provided at the classroom level; the service provider works with the students as a group in their classroom rather than pulling them for individual or group sessions. As such, enrichment services are worked into the classroom schedule and curriculum. The focus of enrichment services is thus general to the class rather than specific for each student. Art therapy as an enrichment service can address issues that have been noted by the classroom teacher; thus it is a good idea to seek input and feedback from the teacher when proposing or refining session objectives.

Regardless of whether a student receives art therapy as a related service or as an enrichment service, the utmost reason behind the use of these services is the student's educational need. It is important for an art therapist going into a special education setting to be able to articulate this point to administrators, teachers, and parents/guardians. Doing so will facilitate understanding and acceptance of art therapy's applicability to the special education population and ultimately allow for more students to benefit from the important and unique contributions art therapy is well-suited to make in the world of public education.