

The Impact of Visual Art Therapy on the Psychological and Mental Health of Students with Learning Difficulties in the Second Cycle in the Sultanate of Oman from the Perspective of Their Teachers

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the impact of visual art therapy on the psychological and mental health of a sample of students with learning difficulties in South Al Batinah Governorate in the Sultanate of Oman, from the perspective of their teachers. The study adopted a descriptive-analytical approach using interviews as the primary data collection tool. The research was conducted with teachers who participated in the therapeutic sessions of an intervention based on artistic practices integrating visual arts activities with the Arabic language curriculum, particularly reading and oral expression skills. The intervention targeted self-esteem, social communication skills, and oral expression skills among students with oral language difficulties and dyslexia. The findings indicated that the art-based therapeutic intervention had a positive effect on students with oral language difficulties and dyslexia in improving their psychological and mental health, as reflected in enhanced self-esteem, social communication, and oral expression. Accordingly, the researcher recommended the need to evaluate art therapy-based interventions within school environments across various domains and among different student groups.

Keywords: Visual art therapy, learning difficulties, psychological and mental health.

INTRODUCTION

School students require sound **cognitive, psychological, and physical development**, as these fundamental needs are closely linked to their other needs (Al-Salmi, 2019). A child's psychological, motor, social, emotional, and intellectual abilities, as well as their knowledge and educational experiences, cannot develop properly unless they receive a balanced education that takes into account all the requirements imposed by the nature of the modern era (Abbas et al., 2021a). Mental and psychological health among children is also considered one of the educational priorities within school environments, as it directly affects their ability to learn (Bou Al-Shoush, 2020).

Bartosh and Bartosh (2020a) indicated that **30–40% of school students experience discomfort in their school life** due to psychological and mental difficulties, which negatively affect the development of their personality. Moreover, a child's comfort and ability to adapt depend on their capacity to manage cognitive and psychological processes in an organized manner that enables them to perform their educational tasks more effectively (Bou Al-Shoush, 2020; Al-Salmi, 2019).

Learning based on **visual arts** relies on capturing students' attention through elements they enjoy or find engaging, and gradually employing these elements in the learning process with continuous support and positive reinforcement. This encourages patience and persistence in achieving learning goals through artistic practice (Abbas et al., 2021a). Art therapy has emerged as a means of facilitating and encouraging **self-expression and emotional awareness**, which in turn promotes verbal and non-verbal expression of feelings and allows easier communication of difficult emotions (Malboeuf-Hurtubise et al., 2021a). Growing evidence suggests that integrating **arts-based therapies** into the educational system may help meet children's emerging needs, positively impact their well-being, and bridge the gap between mental and psychological health and educational development (Z. Moula, 2021).

Problem of the Study

The education of students with learning difficulties involves numerous challenges for both teachers and students. Among these challenges is the lack of clear legal regulations, specialized curricula, or schedules that suit students with learning difficulties or align with other academic subjects, which makes it difficult to withdraw students from regular classes (Al Maqbali & Alfawair, 2020). Due to the large number of students with learning difficulties, teachers often find it difficult to design individualized programs, forcing them to rely on traditional teaching methods rather than innovative approaches that could support students and improve their academic and psychological performance (Al-Saeed, 2019; McDonald & Holttum, 2020a).

Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following research question: What are the results of learning difficulties teachers' evaluations of the impact of visual art therapy on improving the psychological and mental health of students with learning difficulties in the Sultanate of Oman?

Significance of the Study

From a **practical perspective**, the current study benefits administrative and teaching staff as well as students in educational institutions by supporting the development of therapeutic and rehabilitation programs based on visual arts activities to help overcome the challenges students face in school life. From a **theoretical perspective**, the study contributes to bridging a gap in the literature related to students and teachers of learning difficulties by highlighting key concepts and issues concerning methods and strategies for enhancing learners' mental and psychological health, thereby supporting the improvement and development of their educational abilities.

Definitions of the Study Terms

Visual Art Therapy: Visual art therapy refers to psychological therapeutic approaches that aim to facilitate psychological change and personal growth through various expressive media, such as visual arts, music, dance, drama, and other artistic forms. It is a process that involves spontaneous images emerging from the unconscious, where the individual's unconscious world is connected to artistic materials and products through symbolic behaviors (Z. Moula, 2021).

Learning Disabilities: Learning disabilities are defined as a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using spoken or written language or in performing basic mathematical operations. Students with learning disabilities demonstrate a statistically significant discrepancy between their expected academic achievement and their actual performance. This discrepancy is attributed to delayed development of the central nervous system or to functional impairments (Khasawneh, 2021).

Psychological Health: Psychological health is a state of inner balance that enables individuals to utilize their abilities in harmony with the universal values of society, such as self-respect, respect for others, interpersonal relationships, and respect for individual freedoms. It also includes cognitive and social skills, the ability to understand, express, and empathize with others' emotions, and the capacity to cope flexibly with negative life events. Furthermore, the relationship between the body and the mind plays a significant role in maintaining inner balance (Eriksson et al., 2018; Levine et al., 2021).

Mental Health: Mental health is a state of well-being in which individuals are aware of their own abilities and able to use them effectively. It enables them to recover from the stress of daily routines, cope with life pressures,

and work productively and fruitfully in ways that benefit both themselves and their communities (Eriksson et al., 2018; Galderisi et al., 2017; Teles et al., 2020).

STUDY METHODOLOGY

Study Design

The researcher employed a **qualitative research approach**, using interviews as a primary method of qualitative data collection. Interviews involve conversations or dialogues with individuals who are directly related to the research topic and are considered one of the main methods for collecting information in qualitative research (Afan, 2018).

Population and Sample of the Study:

The study sample consisted of **four female teachers** who participated in implementing a therapeutic intervention. The sample included all art therapy practitioners involved in applying the therapeutic intervention to students with learning difficulties in inclusive classrooms. A **purposive criterion sampling** method was used, in line with qualitative research methodology, which allows researchers to intentionally select participants who are expected to provide in-depth insights into the phenomenon under study and contribute meaningfully to answering the research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Research Instrument (Qualitative Method):

The researcher relied on **semi-structured interviews** as the primary research instrument. The interview questions were developed based on the research questions and the therapeutic intervention framework. The interview consisted of **seven questions** focusing on artistic practice within the therapeutic intervention implemented in classroom settings by the participating teachers. The interview sample included four teachers who implemented the therapeutic intervention with students, with the aim of exploring the outcomes of the intervention in terms of **oral expression, social communication, and self-esteem**.

Results of the study

Results of the Research Question: What are the results of learning disabilities teachers' evaluations of the impact of art therapy on improving the psychological and mental health of students with learning disabilities in the Sultanate of Oman?

To answer this question, interviews were conducted. The analysis process began by transcribing the interview data from the audio recordings into **Microsoft Word**, followed by repeated readings of the transcripts. The data were then imported into **MaxQDA** for analysis and coding through a data indexing system that categorized the data into themes and codes (Mason, 2005). This process was carried out inductively through immersion in the data, with careful and in-depth reading of the texts to gain a comprehensive understanding of the interview content (Johnson, 2024). The analysis was also guided by the research questions, study concepts, and relevant literature.

Subsequently, the results obtained from **MaxQDA** were transferred back to **Word**. A total of **54 codes** were identified. The participants' interview responses revealed a rich body of knowledge, from which **six major themes** emerged to evaluate the effectiveness of the art therapy intervention in addressing the fourth research question. The following figure illustrates the emergent themes.

DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

The analysis of interviews with teachers who participated in the art therapy intervention revealed several key themes, including: enhancing self-esteem, stimulating students' motivation to learn and participate, building positive relationships between students and their teachers, developing students' linguistic repertoire, improving the ability to clearly express ideas, and highlighting the importance of practitioner expertise in implementing art therapy.

The first theme that emerged from teachers' responses regarding students with oral language difficulties and dyslexia was the ability of art therapy to enhance self-esteem. Teachers reported that the artistic practices implemented during the therapeutic sessions—particularly self-expression activities—gradually led to an improvement in students' self-esteem by enhancing both visual and verbal self-expression.

Art therefore served as a catalyst for students' self-understanding, allowing them to reflect on themselves and externalize their inner experiences through artistic elements drawn on a blank sheet of paper. This process enabled students to perceive their inner feelings as translatable and understandable, facilitating self-awareness and self-actualization by releasing suppressed emotions and enabling them to confront challenges, particularly academic difficulties. This finding is consistent with **Moula (2020)**, who indicated that art therapy interventions can be effective in improving self-concept, problem-solving skills, and attitudes toward school.

At the initial stage, the therapeutic intervention consisted of sessions aimed at emotional release, during which students provided simple responses about what they were expressing. Subsequently, group activities were formed to encourage students to exchange feedback with one another regarding their artistic expressions. By the end of the therapeutic sessions, students were able to speak in front of others about their completed artworks, whether drawings, modeled pieces, or sculptures. Gradually, this process contributed to building the confidence of students with learning disabilities, enabling them to speak and participate more actively.

The findings of **Moula, Aithal, et al. (2020a)** further support this result, as students demonstrated significant improvements by the end of the therapeutic sessions in self-esteem, self-confidence, self-expression, mood, communication, understanding, flexibility, and learning.

This was further confirmed by **Moula et al. (2022)**, in which all participating children were interviewed individually after engaging in arts-based therapies. The children expressed, both verbally and artistically, that they had experienced positive changes in their mental health, including enhanced self-expression, emotional safety, empowerment, hope, and optimism about the future.

Similarly, the findings of **Hylton et al. (2019)** closely aligned with these results, indicating that students developed a deeper understanding of themselves through artistic practices during therapeutic sessions by expressing and valuing their own identities.

McDonald et al. (2019) summarized that engaging in art-making combined with thinking, learning, and expressing ideas and emotions had a substantial and noticeable impact by the end of the therapeutic sessions. Moreover, **Bartosh and Bartosh (2020)** reported that all forms of therapy assessed influenced personality traits related to students' need for self-disclosure and self-presentation to others. In addition, students participating in art therapy in the study by **Harpazi et al. (2020)** stated through interviews that they initially perceived art merely as an opportunity for enjoyment or leaving the classroom; however, they ultimately realized that they were engaged in a deeply personal and emotional process centered on their identities, allowing them to express their feelings without fear of judgment.

McDonald and Drey (2018a) conducted a systematic review of studies examining the effectiveness of art therapy in primary schools, aiming to assess quality, synthesize findings, and provide recommendations for future research. Out of 201 studies reviewed, only four confirmed the concept of self-actualization and self-esteem. One study reported no significant effect on outcomes; however, it maintained self-concept scores in contrast to the substantial decline observed in the control group that received no intervention.

Theme Two: Enhancing Students' Motivation to Learn and Participate

Teachers participating in the study reported that art-based practices stimulated students' motivation to learn and actively participate in the classroom.

The application of visual art tools in therapeutic interventions for students with oral language difficulties and dyslexia—such as images, shapes, colors, clay, and other materials—captured students' attention and focus, directing them toward knowledge acquisition and academic content. By simultaneously engaging both

hemispheres of the brain through words and images, these practices directly enhanced cognitive attention and encouraged students to receive, process, and comprehend information more effectively.

These findings are consistent with **Malboeuf-Hurtubise et al. (2021a)**, who demonstrated the ability of art-based activities to reduce hyperactivity and inattention by engaging students in motivating and attention-grabbing tasks. This result was also supported by **Akhavan Tafti et al. (2021)** and **Azizi et al. (2022a)**, whose studies focused on students with learning disorders accompanied by attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Furthermore, **Ramirez, Haen, and Cruz (2020)** and **Ramirez, Haen, and Flaum (2020)** reported that art therapy supports students' learning and educational needs beyond the primary stage, whether they are students experiencing academic underachievement or high-achieving students with positive perceptions of their academic performance. **Bartosh and Bartosh (2020)** also noted that children became more determined, active, independent, and proactive as a result of reduced academic performance-related anxiety.

Theme Three: Building Positive Relationships Between Students and Teachers

The third theme derived from teachers' responses was the development of positive relationships between students and their teachers. **Seitenov (2020)** highlighted the ability of therapists to assess and strengthen relationships with children in order to inform art therapy approaches.

In the studies by **Bokoch and Hass-Cohen (2021a)**, group-based art learning contributed to the formation of positive peer relationships by reducing hyperactivity, distraction, and enhancing attention and comprehension. Similar findings were reported by **Shakarov et al. (2019a)** and **McDonald and Holtum (2020)**. Additionally, **Yaghoobian and Emadian (2019)** demonstrated the effectiveness of sandplay art therapy in improving students' interpersonal communication skills.

This was further supported by **Moula (2021)**, who emphasized the positive impact of art on children's health and well-being through creative activities that foster emotional expression and social connectedness, enabling the exchange of experiences and emotions. **Bartosh and Bartosh (2020)** also summarized that various forms of art therapy reduced anxiety levels in students' relationships with peers, teachers, and parents, thereby decreasing overall learning-related anxiety and enhancing students' communication and self-confidence.

Accordingly, art-based practices implemented in inclusive classrooms focused on three core variables: self-esteem, social communication, and oral expression. By strengthening students' self-esteem, greater responsiveness, interaction, and social integration through collaborative work were achieved, ultimately enabling students to speak and express themselves confidently in front of others.

Theme Four: Developing Linguistic Repertoire

The fourth theme addressed the development of linguistic repertoire among students with oral language difficulties and dyslexia. Through attempts at verbal expression and articulation of what was visually represented on paper, and by benefiting from peer interactions in the classroom, students developed a richer linguistic repertoire that enabled them to speak more confidently in front of others.

This finding aligns with **Azizi et al. (2022a)**, who revealed that students lacking the necessary verbal, cognitive, and social skills to express their emotions experience difficulties in social interaction and suffer from frustration and disappointment. Students with oral language difficulties and dyslexia, in particular, often lack these essential expressive skills.

Furthermore, **Ratnik and Rüütel (2019)** indicated that school-based art therapy can enhance students' skills and support the achievement of educational goals. Their study also highlighted that art therapy can be applied as an early intervention for children in schools, given its immediate positive effects on students' development and academic performance.

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