USING ART AS THERAPY FOR YOUNG CHILDREN EXPERIENCING TRAUMATIC EVENTS
(An Overview for Aceh Early Childhood Education Curriculum Development)

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ABSTRACT

Art therapy is a process of therapy which is using art as the recovery tool. Art therapy focus solely on its therapeutic process not on the end result of art product. Art therapy directly connect with all development stages of a child. They are using their physic to express their affection/empathy or anger toward their surroundings. In the process, they are applying their cognitive knowledge to be able to transfer the suppressed emotions into the process of creating the art. Aceh received the worst impact of Tsunami 2004 compare to other places. Its education is destroyed not only its infrastructure but also its process. Young children is the most fragile victim who needs special treatment during the recovery process. All children experience trauma during their life, not only tsunami victim, although the traumatic level might differs from one to another. The use of art therapy is very helpful in the learning process. The use of art therapy will release “the impediment” within the child to be able to better function in the society. The inclusion of art therapy within curriculum will ensure the usage.

Key Words: Art Therapy, Traumatized Children, Developmental Stages, Curriculum

ABSTRAK

sangat bermanfaat dalam proses pembelajaran anak usia dini. Proses ini akan melepaskan “penghalang” yang ada dalam diri si anak sehingga ia dapat berfungsi dengan lebih baik. Memasukkan terapi seni dalam penyusunan kurikulum akan memastikan digunakannya terapi seni ke dalam proses pembelajaran.

Kata Kunci: Terapi Seni, Anak yang mengalami trauma, Tahap perkembangan, Kurikulum
Introduction

After tsunami 2004, Aceh has become the center study for many types of science. This happens because Aceh received many attentions and innovations in solving problems for recovery and development process. Many programs for the educational projects involved art and varieties of playful activities since Aceh status was considered emergency and many children had traumatic experiences due to tsunami and therapy was urgently needed.

A. Understanding Art Therapy

Universal Declaration of Human Rights in article 25 (2) stated that “Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection”¹. In addition to it, within article 27 (1), United Nations also declared that “Everyone has the right to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits”². According to Dean, the term of “art” has been considered difficult to define. There has been too much focus on the adjective form of the “art” rather than the noun form. Some art historians concurs that “art” is an ambiguous term with multi various and inconsistent meaning. In his essay, he stated that “art” as a special category of things and practices composed of subcategories defined variously by medium, function, geographic provenance, value, and so on is not recognized worldwide³.

The term art therapy has been widely used within wide practice of education, rehabilitation and psychotherapy lately. There is no certain professions are being claimed as the only art therapist. According to Ulman, the term of art therapist is being referred to certain professionals and volunteer workers, even though no similar educational preparation, no set of qualifications, nor even any voluntary association binds these people together. The only thing in common is probably the materials of the visual arts which are used in an attempt to assist the

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² Ibid.
integration or reintegration of personality. In art therapy, some emphasis is given on art and on some therapy, or in other words, therapy itself is not enough or art has no meaning without the creative process of understanding it⁴.

Barber says, “Art therapy is not about a beautiful end product but about the process and experience of creation. Spontaneous art of different kinds can be used as tools to uncover the expressiveness of subconscious mind, and can bring problems closer to the surface⁵. Rubin expressed her understanding toward art therapy as the process of understanding and helping a person through art, and that it encompasses a wide variety of dimensions⁶. These include the integrative aspects of the creative process itself, as well as the use of art as a tool in the service of discharge, uncovering, defense and communication. It is difficult to characterize the process, even with one human being or in one setting, as being any one thing is always different, as art is serving many different possible functions. The important thing to know is what is occurring when art product is created, and to have some sense of its meaning and function for the creator at the moment.

Furthermore, Kramer stated her opinion about art therapy as a means of widening the range of human experiences by creating equivalents for such experiences. It is an area wherein experiences can be chosen, varied, repeated at will. In the creative art, conflict is re-experienced, resolved and integrated⁷. For centuries, art had helped human to reconcile internal and everlasting conflict between society’s demands with individual’s natural urge. Every works of art contains a core of conflicting drives which give it life and determine form and content to a large degree. Works of art resemble dream, fantasy, and feelings of the creator as a communication tool for the unexpressed emotions. The feeling of burden, repressions and denials is being easier to be deescalated by such artistic experiences. Kramer did not set a clear proportional line between art and therapy

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in art therapy, since they may vary within a wide range. However anything that is
to be called art therapy must genuinely take of both art and therapy\(^8\).

Briefly, Proulx described the importance of having art therapy with a child. She said that art therapy provided a “container” where a child could interact safely and pleasurably. And by providing age-appropriate art-materials, a child will be able to lead his/her own imagination\(^9\). The experiences express the communicating, relating and observing process in the art making which will show the emotional and development level of the child. The appropriate activities will surely facilitate the growth of emotional and developmental level of the child.

**B. Recognizing Young Children with Traumatic Events**

According to United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child in Bhutan, a child is legally defined as a person who has not reach the age of 16 for girls and anyone who has not attained the age of 18 for boys\(^10\). From this definition we still can track down the child definition into infancy, early childhood, preschool age, and early school age based on the developmental theory as stated by Kravtsova\(^11\).

At the age of early preschool, children have a sense that they and others have mental states such as thoughts, desires, feelings and plans. At this stage, children have started early social relationships with others. According to Eriksson’s psychosocial stages of development as cited in Broderick and Blewitt, approximately from the age of three to five or six years old, a child tries to behave in ways that involve more “grown up” responsibility and experiments with grown up roles. It is said that on these stages, a child is on the process of finding the right balance between positive and negative feelings, with the positive outweighing the negative. The successful resolution of crisis at this stage will help

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\(^8\) Ibid.


\(^10\) United Nation.(1999, April), Convention on the right of the child, Bhutan

smooth the way to a successful resolution for future crises. On the contrary, unsuccessful resolution at this stage might hinder the progress and make maladaptive behavior more likely\textsuperscript{12}.

With a pretty young age, children are more open to many experiences. They are not only cheerful and delightful; many unpleasant experiences also will likely take part at these stages. Children will have to pass these stages just like any other adult before they become grown up – anyone encounters an array of human problems. Despite the feature differences, all relate – a couple’s arguing about their mortgage, a teenager uncertainty about the future, a widower difficulty leaving alone, a young child difficulty adjusting to school - to the same aspects: they all, to a greater or lesser degree, involve in human emotion. Broderick and Blewitt stated that emotions exist to serve many purposes for human beings\textsuperscript{13}. Emotions provide human a trusty arsenal for survival skills and also as a major means of communication. Emotions also play a role in mental health and wellness. It is believed that human across countries are sharing basic emotions such as fear, sadness, happiness, anger and surprise. The form of these basic emotions may vary for certain aspects such as the emotions of contempt and disgust when it is viewed from the cross cultural perspectives.

During their growth, children will use these emotions to express their feelings either in fortunate events or traumatic events. Children will be likely to release their positive emotions or negative emotions through their faces, behavior, and attitude and also through their artwork. It is a lot easier to explain the circumstances of children experiencing events which stimulate positive emotions. However, talking about children releasing their negative emotions, what are the circumstances that can be used to describe the traumatic events experienced by children?

Traumatic events for children can vary within different types. There is no doubt that children experiencing natural or human made disaster are having shocking experiences that will leave them scarred for the rest of their life. There is


\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
also a potent possibility that children experiencing child abuse, being neglected and being a victim of accidents also considered as experiencing a traumatic event. Moreover, experiencing pressures in daily life from being scolded by parents, first day to school or being surprised by a dog can also be categorized as traumatic events. Taylor describes that children are facing a lot of pressures within everyday life. She figures some examples:

“John was aggressive one day because he had experienced a number of distressing incidents. He got a stick horse and galloped around and around the play yard. When he returned, he said, “I feel better now. Let’s go read a story.” Russ had been frightened by a dog on his way to school. At the finger painting table, he made a resemblance of the dog and then quickly rubbed it out with a remark, “he can’t bark at me now.” Susan picked up a doll and rocked it, saying, “You’ll feel better if I sing to you and hold you close (p.33).”

From these examples the writer assumes that children are very prone to every experience or incidents happens to them or surrounds them. And we can use the creativity within the children to release their pressuring experiences so that they can feel better, and art therapy is one of the options.

C. Relationship between Art Therapy and Traumatized Young Children

There has been a lot of research done to show that art plays a significant part in children’s lives of all ages. Art assists children to show their unexpressed emotions, which is especially essential for young children who are just learning to use language to communicate. Art helps children explore some of the complexities of the real world in small manageable pieces. Art and childrenis a natural bond. Through art, children absorb opportunity to tell about their evolving concepts, their constructed understanding and their experiences to the world. Children use art as one of their communications tool when they draw, paint or create a clay shape.

Kramer categorizes five basic ways in which art materials can be used as therapy:

1. Precursory activities: scribbling, smearing, exploring physical properties of the material in ways that do not lead to the creation of symbolic configuration but

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are experienced as positive and egosyntonic (Egosyntonic is a medical term referring to behaviors, values, feelings, which are in harmony with or acceptable to the needs and goals of the ego, or consistent with one’s ideal self-image. It is studied in detail in abnormal psychology)
2. Chaotic discharge: spilling, splashing, pounding and other destructive behaviors leading to loss control
3. Art in the service of defense: copying, tracing, banal conventional production, and stereotyped repetition
4. Pictographs: pictorial communication that replace or supplement words (such communication occur as the therapeutic relationship grows)
5. Formed expression: art in the full sense of the word – the production of symbolic configurations that successfully serve both self-expression and communication.15

These basic techniques are used in accordance to what children need. In art therapy, children can directly manipulate materials and the environment, symbolically exploring, organizing and assimilating meaning from a complex word of ideas and experiences. This may facilitate order, reduce confusion and uncertainty and promote the integration of experiences. Shostak confirmed the integrative process is significant for children since they will experience, communicate and negotiate through developmental levels16. The person in charge who handles these traumatized young children also need to know the characteristics of a child before he or she applies one of these five ways toward the children. Moreover, this person needs to keep in mind that art therapy is more focused toward the therapeutic process rather than the artistic product from the child. Barber said that art activities within nurseries and school are frequently applied without a true understanding of the process children are going through. Children are too often being stopped in mid-stream when doing a painting because the carers think it is a “nice” picture and if the child does not stop to paint, the paint will stop to be a “nice” picture afterall. This meets the need of the carers rather than the child17.

17 Barber, Loc. Cit
Shostak, DiMaria & Schoebelnarrated that art therapy in a school setting can offer opportunities to work through impediments that hold back educational success\(^{18}\). Art therapy can smooth the progress of appropriate social behavior and support healthy affective development so that children can become more receptive to learning, realizing their social and academic potential. At the early school age, children face a lot of depression because of their transition time from home environment to school environment. Moving from home to school is experienced by children approximately by the age of three. This time of transition evokes a wide variety of emotions, behaviors, and concerns for both young children and their parents. For many children it is considered a major stepping-stone on the road to becoming more independent. Transition literature as well as transitions studies over the past decade call for a more comprehensive approach to this time of change. The more comprehensive approach is built upon a commitment to teamwork and collaboration where educators and parents work together in designing and implementing transition programs. The national Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) stated that early learning standards can be a valuable part of a comprehensive, high-quaality system of services for young children, contributing to young children’s education\(^{19}\). It is suggested to reduce the level of children anxiety at the transition period and also by recognizing that children’s becoming comfortable in a new school setting is an ongoing process, not a single event.

It is believed that art therapy in a public or a private school is relevant to empower children’s maturation in education and social emotion. The use of art as a therapy in a school setting will help the children to decrease their anxiety level. In art therapy, the interaction session with the children may be chaotic or less. There is a time when a child want to release his/her anger or pressure by batting or bashing towards his/her peers of the carers. Barber\(^{20}\) also shared her experiences working with a group of girls, who for various personal reasons are

\(^{18}\) Shostak, B., DiMaria, A., & Schoebel, Loc. Cit
\(^{20}\) Barber, Loc. Cit
failing within the school system. She discovered that these girls have experienced psychological burden due to abuse and also family breakdown. The dialogue less happens between Barber and the girls; however, their art making unfold the story. They spoke with the unspoken language. The art therapy does not demand children to talk; engaging in the process is the crucial point. Another example was given with a girl who just lost her mother. She used the art therapy process to work through her grief. In her graffiti image, she draws a homage to all people who had died, not only her own and extended family, but also her friend’s losses too. She did not say much but her image did.

The grief process is probably the least talked about. It is painful and critical, time of rebuilding and reordering one’s world. It takes a long time to reach a state of emotional balance especially for young children. Each person experiences differently, but it always a time of powerful and often overwhelming emotion. Sadly enough, there is no time frame set for healing to take place. Some might recover in a little over a year; others might take more than three years or might even face it during their life time. When a child is experiencing these sorts of losses, it is important that the child has a loved one to comfort him/her at these moments, as well as having the necessary art tools to work through the feelings. Raymer & McIntyre said:

Art is a balance for feelings, thoughts and experiences. Art work made spontaneously, can communicate feelings, experiences, fantasies and behavior and coping patterns through medium viewed as safer than verbal communication. ...it quickly apparent that, through art, children responded especially well. It appeared as if they responded much more quickly than through traditional verbal therapy. Art provided a tool which improved self-esteem, was non-threatening and could be used by the child as a healthy release (p.29)\textsuperscript{21}.

Raymer & McIntyre also added the goals of using art therapy for the bereaved children\textsuperscript{22}. The first is encouraging self-expression in art process and product with self and group reflection. This goal is achieved through short

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[\textsuperscript{22}] Ibid.
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discussions about art in order to stimulate child’s self-expression and increase awareness. The second is catharsis in art process and product; creative and constructive expression of feelings. This goal is achieved by expressing emotions with no theme borders. Children may draw whatever they like to release their suppressed feelings. The sadness, pain, helplessness, rage, guilt, anger and preoccupation may be expressed freely in the protective environment utilizing art. The development of flexible but firm inner control and group cohesiveness are the third and the fourth goal. And the last goal is the individual growth and increased self-esteem in art process and product.

It is evident that art therapy fosters and facilitate cognitive and emotional development by providing experiences conducive to psycho-educational growth. This art therapy will not only play a pivotal role for children with special needs but also children who may experience difficulty in their social life. Arnheim said (as cited in Raymer& McIntyre) that art is “...an indispensable tool in dealing with the tasks of life”\(^{23}\).

D. Art Therapy, Child Development and Early Childhood Curriculum

If we want to include art therapy within early childhood curriculum, there should be a rational for it. We need to create a reason why we think the art therapy is significant to take part in the curriculum. Beforehand, we need to understand the young child’s developmental stage related to the use of art to be included in the early childhood curriculum. According to National Association for the Education of Young children, early childhood is defined as the period from birth to age eight\(^ {24}\). However, the development rate is different each child; some may perform earlier or later to compare it to other children. Below is the general overview of a child’s developmental stage in term of physical development, social development, emotional development and cognitive development as described by Brewer\(^ {25}\).

\(^{23}\)Ibid.
\(^{24}\)National Association for the education of Young Children, Loc Cit
### Figure 1. Physical Development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Birth to three years old</th>
<th>Three to four years old</th>
<th>Five to six years old</th>
<th>Seven to eight years old</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical Development</td>
<td>Physical skills develop rapidly</td>
<td>Physical skills increase</td>
<td>Skips on alternate feet</td>
<td>Physical skills become important in self-concept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sits and crawls</td>
<td>Rides a tricycle</td>
<td>Rides two-wheel bike</td>
<td>Energy levels are high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Walks and begins to run</td>
<td>Walks up and down stairs, alternating feet</td>
<td>Skates</td>
<td>Rate of growth slows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fine motor skills develop; can stack and pick up small objects</td>
<td>Runs</td>
<td>Throws fairly accurate</td>
<td>Fine muscles control is good; can from letters well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Manages spoon or fork for feeding</td>
<td>Jumps with both feet</td>
<td>Catches ball with hands</td>
<td>Permanent teeth appear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grasps and releases objects</td>
<td>Walks balance beam</td>
<td>Turn somersaults</td>
<td>Body proportions; facial structure change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Catches ball with arms extended</td>
<td>Participating in games requiring physical skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Walks backward and on tiptoe</td>
<td>Small muscle development increases; eye-hand coordination develops</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Holds crayon with fingers</td>
<td>Fine muscle control increases; can use hammer, pencil, scissors, etc.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Figure 2. Social development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Birth to three years old</th>
<th>Three to four years old</th>
<th>Five to six years old</th>
<th>Seven to eight years old</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Development</td>
<td>Responds to others</td>
<td>Becomes more self aware</td>
<td>Express rigid ideas about sex roles</td>
<td>Is more competitive with peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enjoys company of other children</td>
<td>Develops more altruistics feelings</td>
<td>Has best friends but for short period of time</td>
<td>Depends on parents for expansion of interests, and activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Can maintain involvement with another for a very short period</td>
<td>Becomes aware of racial/ethnic and sexual differences</td>
<td>Quarrel often but anger is short lived</td>
<td>Is influenced by peer opinions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Is unable to share without coaxing</td>
<td>Is able to take direction, follow some rules</td>
<td>Is able to share and take turns</td>
<td>Plays with opposite sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shows very little</td>
<td>Has strong</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ability to postpone gratification  
Imitates actions of others  
Begins to engage in parallel play  

feelings toward home and family  
Shows a growing sense of self-reliance  
Parallel play is common; cooperative play begins  
Imaginary playmates are fairly common  

Is eager to participate in school experiences  
Considers teacher very important  
Wants to be the first  
Become possessive  

less often  
Needs teacher approval  
Is able to share  
Wants to please  
Is more dependent at work and play  
Forms more enduring friendships  
Peer groups begin to form

Figure 3. Emotional Development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Birth to three years old</th>
<th>Three to four years old</th>
<th>Five to six years old</th>
<th>Seven to eight years old</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emotional Development</strong></td>
<td><strong>Cannot tolerate frustration</strong></td>
<td><strong>Can tolerate some frustration</strong></td>
<td><strong>Expresses and labels feelings</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cries easily</td>
<td>Develops some self-control</td>
<td>Control aggressions better</td>
<td>Is sensitive to ridicule and criticism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is often unable to control impulses</td>
<td>Appreciates surprises and novel events</td>
<td>Expresses less concern when separated from parents</td>
<td>Expresses more worries; war, loss of parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Begins to express affections</td>
<td>Begins to show sense of humor</td>
<td>Expresses sense of humor in jokes, nonsense words</td>
<td>Shows more persistence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs routine and security</td>
<td>Needs overt expressions of affection</td>
<td>Learns right from wrong</td>
<td>Expresses more empathy; is able to see others’ viewpoints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Begin to perceive emotions of others</td>
<td>Fears the dark, being abandoned, strange situations</td>
<td>Develop a conscience</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expresses self, sometimes emphatically</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4. Cognitive Development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Birth to three years old</th>
<th>Three to four years old</th>
<th>Five to six years old</th>
<th>Seven to eight years old</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Three to four years old</strong></td>
<td><strong>Sensorimotor investigations of environment is</strong></td>
<td><strong>Follow instruction of two commands</strong></td>
<td><strong>Shows a growing attention span</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Developing early childhood curriculum is guided by what we know about how children grow and learn. This includes knowing how children develop physically, how the social environment affects them, their emotional changes and their absorbance of the knowledge provided to them. This overview plays a pivotal role in creating early childhood curriculum and integrating art therapy within it. All of these four areas are related one to another and supporting children in their educational process. While creating art or expressing their
thoughts into art pieces, children are applying all these four components. They are using their physic to express their affection/empathy or anger toward their surroundings. In the process, they are applying their cognitive knowledge to be able to transfer the suppressed emotions into the process of creating the art. Knowing children’s developmental stages, teachers, administrators other professionals will be able to create the curriculum based on appropriate level. These stages will not only help in creating a flexible program for the children but also will help the involved persons to observe the children carefully. Each child is different, even though the age is the same; however, there are always differences within them. These stages will also be of assistance in designing the program that will meet individual and also group needs.

These stages also assist the implementation of art therapy within the curriculum. Since teacher, administrators, or other related professionals understand these developments, they will be able to insert the art therapy process at the necessary level for the child who might need it. There will be people who will define art therapy to be the same as art in education; however, once again art therapy is different. Art therapy will help these young children to express their emotions, because it is the process being counted. The carers should not set up certain standard or critique the children’s pieces of work because art therapy is not producing certain products with certain standard to follow which may even cause another stress for children as they have to fulfill the need of the standard not their own desire. The art which is supposed to be the learning experience will automatically become a boring experience. Kubie and Kaelin said through art, a youngster may experience not only the momentary release of tension through a discharge of surplus energy, the release of un-conflicted energy, newly available for constructive use, through the sublimation and resolution of conflicts once draining his resources\(^26\). Through art, a process in which one is in touch with all level of consciousness, and with extra stimuli, one’s level of awareness may be enlarged, expanded, deepened, and sharpened. This openness to experience may

\(^{26}\) Rubin, Loc. Cit
itself be experienced; first, as a mood; secondly, as an understanding; and thirdly, as expression.

Through art, a child has the opportunity to remove something abstract from his/her mind or understanding and place it within a concrete, translating mind into matter. By helping children to discover what underlying thoughts and feelings they put in their artwork, it will help children to develop a better understanding of themselves and how they relate to others surround them. Annette marie Vaccaro, an art therapist from Livingston, said “We don’t try to tell their story. We try to help them tell their story”27. Thus, it is hoped that through the inclusion of art therapy and deeper understanding of its application at school, the use of art as a therapy will improve children’s development in expressing and releasing themselves from pressures which will likely impede their learning process to be a better person with better mental health, to become a better member within society. The report from Institute of Public Policy Research (IPPR, 2003) mentioned:

“The role that the arts can pay in improving mental health outcomes is twofold. In conjunction with art therapist, they can be used as a therapeutic care strategy. Secondly, they can play a key role in breaking down mental health problems and can help reintegration into the wider community. There is a range of ways that art can make a contribution to promoting positive mental health. It can be a self-initiated activity providing a form of self-expression; it can be used to improve care environments; it can change the way society views mental illness; and can also provide service users with a voice (p. 5)”28

In her article, Heenan reveals the positive outcomes contributed by art therapy for the mental health of her beneficiaries29. The art classes led to improved self-esteem, which in turn enabled participants to engage in more positive social behavior. Therefore, the inclusion of art therapy within school curriculum or other programs intended to improve the well-being of human is necessary. Even though


29 Ibid.
the research about art therapy has been done for more than 20 years, further researches still needed to undertake to provide more scientific based evidence of the beneficial use of art therapy in individual’s lives especially children.
REFERENCES


