



UNDERSTANDING ART-MAKING FROM AN ART THERAPY PERSPECTIVE

Caroline Essame
Singapore

ABSTRACT

This paper will look at how art-making impacts on social and emotional development of children from an art therapy perspective and how this framework can inform arts practice in early childhood. Using stage development theory and objects-relations theory, it explores how ego development occurs through art-making and play, and how this impacts on self-esteem and behaviour. It considers the role of symbolic communication, psychotherapeutic and neurological frameworks in relation to art making and early childhood development, as these are the underpinning of art therapy. For the purposes of this paper a more traditional developmental model of art making will be cited as it is the most often used in psychotherapy research; but the author acknowledges the current debates and differing frameworks both in the education and therapy fields.

Coming from a background in adult mental health, the author will explore how art-making in early childhood may impact on morbidity and the psychological life skills developed in the future adult. Examples from both adult and child art therapy work, done with the author in a clinical setting, will be illustrated and the importance of understanding these processes in early childhood arts education will be discussed.

“It is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self”

Donald Winnicott, paediatrician and psychoanalyst

Introduction to art therapy

Art therapy as a profession has existed since the 1940s but the underpinning philosophy of art as a language for personal and collective expression is not new. In

early cave paintings our ancestors drew the animals they planned to hunt to claim power over them, to make sense of their external world and to make connections with the spirit of creation and the binary opposites of life and death (Gombrich, 1989).

In art therapy, art is used as a means of personal expression to communicate feelings and experiences. Emphasis is very much on the process of creation and exploration rather than the end product. It is the journey that takes place to create an art work within the context of the relationship with the therapist that is of importance for understanding what the art work means: whether the child is relaxed during the creation; what their body language communicates; what the therapist senses is being explored and how the child responds to the end product; as well as the context of that picture in relation to other pictures that tells the symbolic meaning of the picture for that particular child.

Art therapy provides a space for the individual's or group's experiences and information from life to come together in a visual and active rather than verbal form. The sharing of ideas, images and feelings through artwork aims to bring about change and to be healing and restorative, which will be explored further in a case study at the end of this paper.

In figure 1, a young Chinese male from a community mental health service in which the author worked illustrates his experience of living with schizophrenia, depicting himself in front of his family altar. Around his head, which he expresses as feeling 'heaty', he depicts the things that fill his life. From left to right are the knife with which he tried to commit suicide the first time he became unwell, the cigarettes that he smokes daily, then the birds that he hears talking to him – they say they are his friends. Then the music that he plays to drown out the voices he hears and the ghosts that haunt his dreams. Then he draws a lizard which he also hears talking to him and saying that he is bad and should kill himself. Then the pills that he has to take to control his symptoms and the girl who broke his heart, which he felt was the beginning of his illness.



Figure 1

Through the making of this artwork, the young man was able to tell his story to communicate with the therapist his understanding of his life and his illness. Through

sharing the picture, the therapist could understand more about the young man, his behaviour and his perceptions; and from then on every time the therapist heard a bird or a lizard she was able to talk with him about what he heard and how it made him feel, reducing his loneliness and fear and strengthening the therapeutic relationship. Also, through the creation of a physical image of his life, the young man gained a greater sense of his own reality and was able to visualise and express himself more clearly.

It is not only the making of art that creates the change and healing, but also the making of art in the context of a therapeutic relationship, a relationship that facilitates and nurtures the creation. It is a relationship that is non-judgmental, and affirmative of the individual's explorations and journey. In psychodynamic theory, this relationship can be seen to symbolically represent the affirmative and nurturing relationship of the "good enough mother" (Winnicott, 1971), the crucial early childhood environment believed to impact on all subsequent psychological development. Psychotherapy theory places much emphasis on the child's experiences in the early years of development, and it is hence interesting and potentially instructive to connect it to broader stage development theory.

In art therapy, art-making is understood to occur in two stages. The pre-representational stage (Dubowksi, 1984) is when a child makes marks exploring her sensory motor skills, usually between 15 months and four years of age. It is a locomotive stage where children explore boundaries and enjoy their control over the external world. In stage development theory, this correlates with Lowenfeld's Scribbling Stage (Lowenfeld, 1947) and Kellogg's The Scribble Stage (Kellogg, 1970) and Piaget's Sensorimotor Stage (Piaget, 1953). It is a time of exploration and discovery for the child of their impact on and relationship with their environment. This is further expanded on and explored by Wright (2003).

Then once they have mastered Kellogg's 20 basic scribble types and are able to draw circles and closed shapes, they move into representational mark-making at about three to four years of age. This is when it becomes symbolic communication, telling their stories, fantasies and aspirations. It becomes a language of who they are. Cognitively and emotionally, at this stage the child has begun to establish a sense of self as an individual, to have internalised a physical and emotional understanding of the world and is beginning to project herself onto it through language and mark making. Art Therapists often see the tadpole man (see figure 2) as the self portrait, an image of an emerging self, the child making herself visible and physically projecting herself onto the world. At the same time, the world can be a daunting place, and hence the child uses the drawn symbols as a way of giving herself control and mastery over her environment, in much the same way as described by Winnicott in object-relations theory.



Figure 2- tadpole man

Object-relations theory

Donald Winnicott, paediatrician and child psychoanalyst (1896-1971) looked at the relationship between the child's developing ego and her relationship with the external object – initially the breast, then the thumb, then the cuddly toy and through this to the process of creative play and mark-making. He explores how this impacts on the child's sense of self and her sense of control and connection with the world around her.

He explains the process of illusion and disillusion (Winnicott,1971) which occurs in the first few months of an infant's life and the role that objects play in helping her cope with the emotional and social changes that take place at this early stage of development. When a child is born her cognition is limited, she can only see 25cm in front of herself and only in black and white and then red and other primary colours (Dayton et al, 1964; Clavadetscher et al, 1988; and Bornstein & Marks, 1982). At this stage she does not see herself as separate from mother, and she has an illusion of omnipotence. Emerging from a safe womb where all her needs are met, it takes some months for her brain neurons to develop to interpret sound, sight and sensing in their entirety.

By about three months, when the child realises she is separate, she can recognise that the parent leaves the room. Intuitively she senses aloneness and realises that she is not totally in control of the world, and she experiences the process of disillusion (Winnicott, 1971). It is at this point that a child will often be given a pacifier and is also physically coordinated enough to find her thumb to suck. Winnicott sees this to be the first creative act, the use of an object to recreate this sense of safety, a sense of control, the beginning of the development of ego strength. The thumb or pacifier reminds the child symbolically and physically of the comfort of "mother" and is seen as crucial to the ego development of the infant and later the child. Not all children use a pacifier or suck their thumbs – indeed not all children play and create, and perceptions of what this involves and means will vary from culture to culture – but this framework can give us a clear idea of what may happen intra-psychically when a child creates, and it is the underpinning of much of the work undertaken by creative arts therapists with both adults and children.

This process develops into what Winnicott describes as the use of transitional objects in creative play, which is commonplace in Western cultures but again by no means universal. Children, he says, will often form a close relationship with a special toy, possibly a soft animal or teddy which enables them to make a transition from emotional dependency on "mother" to a more internalised emotional independence. Through a relationship with the toy, the child finds comfort, explores emotions and can literally hold and have control over what they most need and desire. They use the object to feel good about themselves and the world they find themselves in. How many children clutch their teddy bear determinedly for their first few days at a new pre-school? It gives them a sense of control, a symbol to help them feel less afraid in a potentially frightening alien environment. It is a potent symbolic communication with the inner and outer worlds.

Many adults also use similar processes to feel better about themselves. They have had a bad day so they buy chocolate or have a cup of coffee (eating and drinking remind them of the comfort of maternal feeding) or indulge in retail therapy, buying something

new or expensive as a symbol that they are doing OK, they are worth something (the clutching of a physical object to make them feel good about themselves). Just as children put on a superhero outfit that that makes them feel strong or a princess dress that makes them feel beautiful, people use objects to help internalise the process of feeling good about themselves.

The principles of symbolically using objects in the early years also applies to how children express themselves through their art-making. It is about understanding their impact on the world, how they can feel some mastery over it and express who they are and what they value. An art therapist might propose that when children are directed how to draw too early, or not allowed to explore and make mess as part of their learning, these crucial internalised processes for developing ego strength are limited, and this can impact on the child's self esteem and self belief.

Creative processes for developing a sense of self may then be transferred into more destructive processes such as bullying, attention-seeking behaviour or self harm. Disruptive and destructive behaviour is another symbolic form of communication of the ego, and as destructive communications are the shadow or other side of creative communications, these sometimes damaged or underdeveloped communications can often be transformed through the use of creative art therapy.

Play and art-making in the early childhood years is about creating positive illusions, a sense for children that they are in control of their world. If a value judgment is put on the process of creativity and play, it no longer belongs to the child and her sense of control of her world is limited or manipulated. By adolescence, the child is more aware of others and is making value judgments about her art-making, but up until about eight years of age (if it is not conditioned out of them) the child can enjoy a golden age of creative mark-making (Lukens, 1896) and benefit from the psychotherapeutic benefits of creating positive illusions.

Increasingly research is suggesting that the emotional effects of art making have a physical basis. Children who have had transitional objects in the early years are often able to work symbolically and creatively as they have carved those neurological pathways firmly in their brains. Much of the work of an art therapist is about creating or recreating those processes through art-making and the supportive mother like relationship so that a child or an adult can discover that sense of ego control, of safety and their ability to have some mastery over their inner and outer world. By allowing an adult to reconnect with childhood through simple art making, the therapist helps carve new neurological pathways which will in time help the individual be more adaptive, confident and have greater ego strength.

Psychotherapeutic frameworks for understanding the role of art-making in early childhood

Much of Winnicott's work grew out of the psychotherapeutic understandings developed by Sigmund Freud (1957) and Carl Jung (1960), who created an in-depth language for understanding the unconscious, the motivation of the human mind and the use of symbols. Many schools of thought have grown out of these psychotherapeutic roots in the past century, and different cultures and faiths

understand the unconscious in different ways; but Jung gives a framework for understanding it that fits well with the creative process.

When asked if we dream in words or pictures most people agree that they dream in pictures, supporting the idea that much of their world is stored in memories and the unconscious in visual form; and yet humans have evolved to communicate primarily through verbal means as they become adults. It is only really in the unselfconscious state of early childhood through creative play and mark-making that the intense celebration of the multiple intelligences of the human spirit is made visible (Gardner, 2000).

Jung, particularly, saw art as symbolic communication, the language of the soul and the unconscious. Within art-making he saw many examples of the collective unconscious, the part of the human unconscious that is common to all mankind and passed from one generation to the next. It includes cross-cultural symbols and archetypes embedded in art and mythology and these inherited archetypal mental images affect how an individual responds to universal situations.

Jung said that "The collective unconscious contains the whole spiritual heritage of mankind's evolution, born anew in the brain structure of every individual" (1960), which suggests it may be valuable and instructive to let go of some of the need to direct children's drawing and instead simply facilitate a creative space where the instinct and desire to play and create can take their natural spiritual and developmental course as individuals explore their world and the stories that connect them with mankind's innermost desires. From a Jungian perspective, children create artworks that reflect their emerging consciousness and this must be nurtured, affirmed and recognised in the early childhood years.

Neurological frameworks for understanding the role of art-making in early childhood

In its early years, art therapy was often seen as rather New Age and not based on scientific fact. In the past 10 years, however, due to advances in neuroscience and particularly with the increasing use of brain imaging, we are beginning to learn what happens in the brain when a child creates. The advent of this research has been only recently documented and greeted with much excitement in the field (Hass Cohen & Carr, 2008).

In education, much store has been put on the three Rs – reading, writing and arithmetic – and as we learn more about neurological processing of this learning we are aware that these skills are very much linked in with left-side neurological activity, whereas the arts tap more into right-side brain activity, sensing, making meaning of words, and intuition (Kravits, 2008). Recent research with MRI scans and acute traumatic stress syndrome has shown that the blood supply in acute stress, influenced by cortisol levels, moves to the right side of the brain, leaving a traumatised person unable to process or understand verbally what is happening to them. Given that as adults we live increasingly in a left brain and often verbally oriented world and have been hardwired through our education to process information through language and pragmatic left-side processes, acute trauma leaves us with our right-side brain active

and potentially unable to process what is happening to us.

For creative arts therapists, this research illustrates and affirms a belief that in order to understand and survive in our world we need also to enhance the right-side brain processes of intuiting meaning and sensing the world around us. Education has traditionally focused on the three Rs, but to build on the words of Ken Robinson that schools may be killing creativity (Robinson, 2007) let us not do war (writing, arithmetic and reading) on creativity so crucial to our survival in education but keep creativity and the arts central.

At a trauma conference in Singapore a psychiatrist told a story about children who had survived the Boxing Day 2004 tsunami in Thailand who would, understandably, not go anywhere near the sea even though their future livelihoods depended on it (Quinn, 2008). Post-traumatic stress psychiatrists and counsellors worked with them, encouraging and trying to support them back into the waters that had washed away their parents, siblings, friends, homes and livelihoods. A community art worker then spent a day drawing with them, making their pictures of the tsunami and the raging sea, the broken trees and drowning people. At the end of this day when the trauma had been projected in visual form, worked with and owned, the children were able to run back into the sea.

From a psychotherapeutic perspective, they had taken control of the sea, faced their Jungian shadow and their fears and realised they were not so scary any more. From a neurological perspective, they had processed the experience, made meaning and challenged the neural pathways that instilled and maintained fear, changing the chemical and learning pathways. Either way, they had taken symbolic control of their lives and that is what art can do in therapeutic context.

Case study

Art therapy may be dramatic in a highly-charged situation such as a tsunami, but can be equally effective in other settings. Mervin (not his real name) was referred to the author for creative arts therapy having been removed from his mother after years of neglect. He was referred because he had low self esteem and high levels of anxiety and his key worker felt he would benefit from a safe place where he could play and create and work through some of the trauma and issues that were affecting him. The key worker felt that at seven years old, Mervin would not be able to discuss verbally without adding to the trauma and also did not have the cognitive understanding and language to express and explore what was going on.

A court case was pending as to who should have custody of Mervin and he was not coping at school, academically or socially. When at home with his foster parents he would curl in a ball in his room and line all his toys up in circle around him. When they went out, he would not leave his foster parents' side and had no friends outside of his immediate foster family.

He was seen by the author, a creative arts therapist, for an initial assessment and she looked at his mark-making, his ability to play and sequence a story and his arousal level when alone with a stranger. His mark-making was several years below his

chronological age and he had limited play skills, but he responded well to positive affirmation and enjoyed the one-to-one attention.

Mervin and the creative arts therapist worked together weekly for a period of 12 weeks during which time the therapist provided a safe creative play space where he could explore and express some of the issues that were distressing him. The aims of the sessions were primarily to offer Mervin exposure to a range of creative play and art mediums, to build his social and emotional skills through the therapeutic relationship and to allow him to direct the play process, giving him a sense of control over his internal world and to build his self esteem.

Mervin was very keen on Star Wars and became animated when discussing this subject, so it became the core theme that ran through the sessions and the metaphor of communication for the therapist and Mervin. They made a diorama from papier-mâché that depicted the Star Wars world with which Mervin wanted to play. He explored different marks with paints, glitter and collage, always being allowed to explore what he wanted how he wanted and to decide when his picture was complete. He also made a series of collages of each episode of the Star Wars series. He talked about the main character's loss of his parents and his confusion over the loss of the parents. All discussions were about Star Wars, but through this metaphor and the third person Mervin was able to explore and express some salient issues that were disturbing him. Through mastering and experimenting with different art mediums, Mervin began to take risks and experiment and this process was transferred into his life. His foster parents noted that he was becoming more confident, he was able to run off and explore more when they were out, he was beginning to play more creatively when in his room and he no longer huddled in the corner.

Though a very short intervention, Mervin, who had had limited exposure to his creative instincts, began to tap into those processes and started to build some sense of self. His foster parents were supported to understand the importance of free play and art-making as it allowed him to process his concerns, and continued to encourage it at home.

Conclusion – Why the arts are so relevant to early childhood education

This article has illustrated that art-making has multiple roles to play in the development of the emerging ego of the child. Not only does it hardwire different pathways in the brain with the neurological benefits of ensuring multiple ways of processing life events and giving core social and emotional skills, it is also fundamental to the ego and self esteem of the child.

By allowing the child to explore and express through spontaneous art making, it gives the child validity, a sense of control and inner safety in a big world that is often daunting. A child experiencing separation anxiety in a new situation, for example, may draw a picture of mother or character of strength such as a superhero to feel strong, using symbolic processes to deal with new experiences and also, perhaps new routines encountered at day care or kindergarten. It also provides a safe forum for exploration and a symbolic language for this experience. Children's free drawings are often a metaphorical expression of their psychological and emotional explorations of their

inner and outer worlds.

As educators, we are preparing the child for the adult world and one of the most crucial skills to develop is that of self esteem/ego strength and the ability to frame and interpret the world in a way that creates a story that makes children believe they are valid and in some small way in control of what they do and who they are. Many adults suffering from neurotic conditions with whom the author has worked in mental health services had low self esteem often thought to be linked to early childhood experiences and limited exposure to the creative processes that help develop ego strength. That is why creative arts therapies have proven to be effective in healing in the mental health field, processes well documented by Liebmann (1989) McNiff(1992) Malchiodi (1998) Rhodes (2005) and Martin (2009)

Recent research from the Centre for Child Mental Health (CCMH, 2009) has been exploring how the therapeutic relationship experienced in one-to-one therapy changes the brain structure of the individual and can restore or replace pathways that may not have been developed due to early infancy maternal deprivation. Educators in early childhood are often the first constant relationship a child with additional needs may come across. While educators may not work with the intensity of an individual therapist with a child, if they are nonetheless able to offer a creative affirmative space where a child is able to play and make the artworks she needs to, and explore control and take ownership of her immediate world, they can potentially impact on the developing ego that can affect that child for the rest of her life.

It is important to consider as educators whether art works in the early childhood years should be graded and how it is commented on. If art is, as creative arts therapists believe, a visual projection of the self, then how can anyone give the child a mark? How is it possible to grade selfhood, tell a child she is only 56% and what impact do our observations and suggestions make? In education systems that are geared towards grading, streaming and marking often from very early ages, art-making may be the only subject within the curriculum where children could feel free of judgment, where they can really have a child's voice and follow the play instinct, developing a sense of self belief, confidence and ownership of a bit of their world.

Children can express stories and meaning in art-making long before they have the sophisticated language to express it in words. It is – as believed by Art Therapists – a language for the soul, a language of childhood that many of us have lost, so we do need to tread carefully. (4,312 words)

“When children play, they are working hard trying to make sense of their world”

Doug Goodkin

*Artwork shared with consent of the clients in keeping with the UK Art Therapists Code of Conduct.

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About the author

Caroline Essame has worked in the field of arts and human development for 25 years. An Art Therapist and Occupational Therapist she has worked in educational and hospital settings in England, Malaysia and Singapore with experience in working with a wide range of people.

For the past ten years she has been working more with pre- school children and school aged children with special needs.

She pioneered the first Masters in Art Therapy in Asia and now trains for The Social Service Training Institute in Singapore and is Co-Director of create@centre-stage, a company specializing in creativity and human development. www.carolineessame.com