The History of Art Therapy and its Relationship to Art Education

By: Jamey Lennane
In the late 1800s and early 1900s, Art therapy and Art Education became more present due to the desire to increase quality of life.

Beginning with Paleolithic cave paintings, humans used painting for psychological purposes. By painting on the wall, it would prepare the hunter’s mind for successful hunting.

Art therapy predates psychiatry and psychology.

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Reil and Esquirol were two psychologists believed in the “healing power of beauty together with the reconstructive power of creativity”

Hermann Simon- In the 1920s, he introduced the practice of art therapy into facilities that needed a positive change. The goal was to bring patients into renewed contact with the world. Among these activities were work, sports, music, dance and art therapy.

Adrian Hill- Created the term ‘art therapy’ as a description for his work with tuberculosis patients in the sanitarium.

John Levy- 1943 was one of the first to use art in child psychotherapy.

Madeline Rambert- 1949 French psychiatrist, pioneered the use of puppet in therapy.
Margaret Naumburg (1965) - She was a pioneer in Art Therapy. Naumburg was devoted to an analytical approach to art therapy using Freud’s theories. She started her career as an art teacher at the Walden school, which she founded in 1915. She believed, “that the free art expression of children represented a symbolic form of speech that was basic to all education” (Packard, 1980, p.12), and that there was a “release of the unconscious mind through the use of spontaneous art expression” (Packard, 1980, p.12). In the following years, she concluded that “this form of spontaneous art expression was also basic to psychotherapeutic treatment” (Packard, 1980, p.12).

Edith Kramer - The second major pioneer in art therapy. She began with an art education background. Unlike Naumburg, Kramer didn’t focus on the outcome and symbolic representation, as much as the “very act of creating art as a healing act” (Packard, 1980,p. 12). She believed it was the therapists job to provide a creative atmosphere essential for creating art.
Similarities

Creating art is about the human experience.

As art educators and art therapists, we desire “successful fostering of the independent, secure individual who is able to take risks of transforming his or her ideas, images, and perceptions into visual forms” (St. John, 1986, p.16).

We aid children in the artistic process in order to better improve their health, academic work, and social abilities. As educators we “will not jeopardize the dignity of the productive process by conveying the idea that we are using art as a means to an end and only want the children to produce because we hope that this will somehow improve their condition or their behavior” (Kramer, 1980, p. 17)

Both therapists and educators need to understand children’s productive and creative processes while having genuine respect for the products which are a result of children’s creative efforts.

“We are more likely to be rewarded by improvement in both art and life if we value children’s art for its own sake” (Kramer, 1980, p.17)
Differences...

“Art therapy is meant as a form of expression for students who have emotional disabilities and addresses certain areas of conflict within the students functioning” (St. John, 1986, p.15).

Students in regular art classes have developed a certain level of receptivity, emotionally, physically, socially, and mentally, so they can take advantage of the learning opportunities presented to them. Students must be able to work with peers, benefit from outside stimulation, learn technical skills, and accept criticism, along with others. If students are not able to benefit from this type of instruction, art therapy and therapeutic comes into place (St. John, 1986).

In a typical art curriculum, the program is designed to address three primary goals. The first is to learn how to view the world from an aesthetic perspective through the refinement and development of perception. Second, students gain the ability to translate ideas, images, and feelings into an artistic medium. Lastly, students learn how to appreciate and understand the relationships between works of art and the context in which they exist (St. John, 1986).
Are we misunderstood?

“If an art teacher is not trained as an art therapist, he or she cannot assume the responsibility for addressing the emotional needs of these types of clients” - Patricia A. St. John

While art educators are under pressure from parents and administrators, often times it seems they are more product oriented but not necessarily on purpose, however, Art therapy is “distinguished from art education by a much lower rate of finished work” - Edith Kramer

“To designate art education as product-oriented in the latter sense is demeaning to the profession” - Edith Kramer

Educators still have the role of creating a comfortable healing environment for self-expression and healing to take place.
Many art therapists have backgrounds in art education. Art education is the foundation to art therapy.

Even though art therapists are trained to work with troubled children, art educators are often put in situations where we need to be sensitive to the child’s needs as well.

Drawing from Kramer’s ideas, art should be used to as a “growth-enhancing activity.” Everyone can grow and heal from creating art and exploring self-expression.

Creating art in the classroom can be therapeutic, even if it is not specifically happening in an art therapy setting.
As an artist and educator, I focus on process, not necessarily the end product.
Sources


