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Imagination Station: Activating Creativity in Children with Disabilities

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Imagination Station: Activating Creativity in Children with Disabilities:

Development of a Method

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

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Expressive Arts Therapy Specialization

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Abstract

Play is a major topic of conversation when discussing childhood development is associated with creativity and imagination. Although there has been some research involving the creative process amongst children, little has been explored in regards to expressive arts as a technique to further current studies on play. This paper presents a combined method of intermodal expressive arts therapies and play therapy techniques to aid in the fostering of creativity within children with disabilities by utilized the theoretical framework provided by the Expressive Therapies Continuum (ETC). A current review of literature on the ETC, cognitive functions, and expressive arts modalities is included. The method was conducted in group therapy work with six students ($N = 6$) enrolled in a therapeutic day school. Observations of the method suggest that young populations, especially those struggling with disability, can activate their creativity through the use of expressive arts and play modalities.

Keywords: expressive arts therapy, play therapy, children, ETC, creativity

Imagination Station: Activating Creativity in Children with Disabilities

The expressive therapies continuum (ETC) provides a framework that aides in the explanation of the healing properties of various expressive experiences and the power of creativity. Although the ETC is a theoretical guide, it can provide ideas for which methods and media can be used with clients (Hinz, 2009). The hierarchy of creative expression outlined by the theory of the ETC can help in the understanding of the child's level of functioning. It can also serve as a model for creative transitions in which a child may go through during play.

Among young children, play is a significant aspect of their development. Play allows a child to use their creativity to explore new ideas and the world around them in a safe and positive environment. Children's use of imagination is important during play and can influence the child's overall well-being (Seymour, 2015). The behaviors of children will always be a topic of discussion as it is relevant to all. Through play, a child is encouraged to interact with the world around them and this phenomenon is something inspiring further research and observation.

Gronna, Serna, Kennedy, and Prater (1999) strongly supports the idea that play is a key element in a child's development in their exploration of the use of play as a teaching tool for children with disabilities. An important result from this study is the intervention was able to positively affect the social behaviors of the children. Similarly, Bratton, Ray, Rhine, and Jones (2005) focus their research on play as a major form of communication for children and exploring the efficacy of play therapy with children by completing a meta-analytic review of 93 controlled outcome studies involving play therapy with children presenting emotional and behavioral problems. Combined these studies give evidence of the benefits in using play as a method for work with children.

Not only, can play be used as a teaching method for children but also the arts. Although there is limited research on the effects of arts-based learning and play for young children, using art to induce social skills in others has been explored previously. Bertling (2015) explored the empathy students display regarding the environment through an ecologically-responsive art education program yielding results that supported the theory. This research gives further affirmation of the advantages the arts can have on one's development and support the necessity of future research.

Currently, the ETC has been used to explore visual art therapies and was originally developed with the intention of expanding to other expressive therapy modalities, in fact, individual components described by the ETC have been proven through research to be positively affected by such modalities. For example, Yates and Silverman's (2015) research established that music therapy is a prominent treatment method used that has a significant impact on one's affect.

With the current research combined, it is apparent that there are benefits to play and art. These benefits can be directly related to a child's development. Play and creativity within a child development should not be limited to a singular art form and involves openly engaging with all of the expressive art modalities. The ETC thus provides a framework that allows the possibility of various expressive therapy techniques to aid in a child's overall creative abilities, which will help facilitators understand the creative aspect in the clinical work done with disabled children.

Literature Review

Creativity and Imagination

In modern psychology, creativity and culture are believed to be closely related and is often discussed within current socio-cognitive theories (Reuter, 2015). The use of imagination and creativity can help aid the child in better understanding the world around them and thus is an

important aspect to child development. Imagination is often demonstrated when children engage in play. There are many forms in play can shape and stimulate children's creativity. Reviewing research that has explored the efficacy and relationship between creativity, imagination, play, with childhood aids in better understanding their creative well-being and development.

The concept of creativity is unique to each individual person. One's level and manifestation of their creativity can be influenced by many factors including intercultural and multicultural experiences, which in turn plays a key role in personality development. Creativity can be a difficult concept to describe as it is associated with hundreds of definitions within the Western world alone (Reuter, 2015). On a deeper level, creativity is often defined by what appeals to the general public, but also displays some form of innovation. Even though a clear definition has not been established, creativity has become a signifier of achievement, an important job or life skill that is seen as highly valued within modern culture (Reuter, 2015). This lack of definition opened discussion as to whether creativity is innate or if it can be learned; which in turn leads to how can it best be taught and observed?

Dziedziewicz, Gajda, and Karwowski (2014) discussed teaching cultural sensitivity and creativity to children by creating a program entitled Creativity Compass to determine its' effectiveness among children aged between eight and 12 years old. In this program participants were encouraged to explore different countries with the goal of inciting the development of creativity and increasing cultural awareness. Dziedziewicz et al. (2014) created an assessment instrument which measured participants' intercultural sensitivity and cultural self-awareness to further validity of the overall results. Results showed cultural self-awareness increased within the experimental group by a moderate amount ($F(1,103) = 6.57, p = .01, n^2 = .06$) and creative imagination also increased by a significant amount ($F(1,106) = 8.41, p = .005, n^2 = .073$). Overall

the program proved to be significantly effective in rousing creative abilities, and moderately effective in the development of cultural skills. Dziedziewicz et al. (2014) concluded by stating the importance of teaching children the skills provided in the program and discussed the various limitations to the research such as: external validity and imperfect measurements of intercultural skills.

Along with creativity, emotional regulation has been associated with divergent thinking within children through the practice of pretend play. It is speculated that children with greater imaginations are often better at divergent thinking, thus Hoffmann and Russ (2012) assessed the process of pretend play among female, kindergarten through fourth grade participants ($N = 61$) using tests such as the Affect in Play Scale to measure cognitive and affective processes, the Alternate Uses Test for divergent thinking, the Wisconsin Card Sorting Task, Short Form; WCST-64 for executive functioning and a parent-defined Emotion Regulation Checklist. After conducting a correlational analysis, the data was interpreted evaluating creativity and pretend play when measured by divergent thinking, storytelling, and emotional regulation. There was little to no significant relationship demonstrated with executive functioning. In conclusion, Hoffmann and Russ (2012) discuss the limitations of the study being the gender of the sample participants and the fault in relationships between variables being compared solely in a bidirectional manner and do not show causation. Overall, this research provides further evidence in the discussion of pretend play in relation to creativity and emotional regulation.

Creativity and imagination are important skills that children should be encouraged to demonstrate. Both Dziedziewicz, Gajda, and Karwowski (2014) and Hoffmann and Russ (2012) have expressed these skills can be directly related to other significant abilities such as divergent

thinking, awareness, emotional regulation, and executive functioning. It is also noted that such creative abilities within children is often expressed through play.

The Importance of Play

While further research regarding the topic of creativity and imagination in relation to a child's development is continued, it is clear that play is an important outlet in which a child can express themselves and increase their understanding of their world. Early views on play expressed that the imagination is an internal activity on behalf of the individual, but recently this has changed to explore the importance of natural play (Seymour, 2015). Natural play is currently defined as not being solely about personal imagination and self-expression, but can also be considered a connection with others and the understanding of one's experience through a socio-cultural context. Natural play becomes a child's first attempt at self-regulated responses to conflict in the child's environment.

First coined in 1921, the concept of play therapy was used as a means for extending and applying psychoanalytic approaches to work done with children (Johnson, J.L., 2015). The use of play in therapy was deemed appropriate developmentally for interactions with children as a way to engage, communicate, and assess children in a clinical format. The official definition provided by the Association for Play Therapy 1997 is

Play therapy is the systematic use of a theoretical model to establish an interpersonal process wherein trained play therapists use the therapeutic powers of play to help clients prevent or resolve psychosocial difficulties to achieve optimal growth and development.

(Seymour., 2015, p. 7)

Since its' development, play therapy has been organized into core theories such as:

psychoanalytic and Jungian play therapy, child-centered play therapy, cognitive-behavioral play

therapy, filial therapy, theraplay, exosystemic play therapy, and prescriptive play therapy. Through play, a child is also encouraged to interact with peers and this phenomenon is something aspiring further observation.

Bratton, Ray, Rhine, and Jones (2005) focused their research on play as a major form of communication for children and exploring the efficacy of play therapy with children. A meta-analysis of 93 controlled outcome studies involving play therapy with children presenting emotional and behavioral problems is conducted to further previous research and to contribute to the overall frame of research on the effects of child psychotherapy. Play therapy, filial therapy, family play therapy, therapeutic play, and play in therapy were key words used in the search for articles used in review as well as articles dated between 1942-2000. Bratton et al. (2005) compared and categorized articles by treatment type/theoretical model, treatment provider, treatment setting, treatment format, treatment duration, age and gender, target problem behaviors, and types of outcome measures. Mean effect sizes all differed reliably from 0 ($p < .05$) for treatment characteristics, child characteristics, and study characteristics proving the efficacy of play therapy with children presenting with emotional and behavioral difficulties. Bratton et al. (2005) discussed the limitations of the study stemming from lack of detailed research from articles used and the variation of presenting problems shown.

Play in the Academic Setting

A child is constantly learning new things in their environment and spends most of their time in an educational setting. It is therefore critical that research on a child's overall development involves looking into their learning environment and process. Play has a key role in the behaviors of children and how they interact with the world around them. Bratton et al. (2005) explored the effects of play and concluded there are significant benefits. Research has made

great efforts in justifying play therapy with children in general, but further arguments can be made to the advantages of play within academic settings.

Although extensive research has been conducted on the use of educational games with lower level students, little has been conducted with upper elementary or middle school aged children. Mongillo (2008) explored the influence of such games on 27 average ability students ($N = 27$), aged 12-14 in a seventh-grade classroom. The investigation was conducted to ascertain the affect of students maintained toward scientific learning and concepts after educational game participation. Mongillo (2008) used interviews, classroom observations, self-study evaluations and field notes during a six-week period as the means for data collection. This study used a logicoinductive process where the themes were compared; the data established that motivation, interest, and fun are key aspects of play. Results showed that there is less threat of embarrassment of giving wrong responses when games are used when compared to a traditional classroom setting. The results were contributed to a unique feature of gameplay which incorporates everyday language to explore educational areas. The benefit of a relaxed environment, allowed students to become absorbed in the activity, thus creating an optimal experience for learning.

Within this same relaxed environment, art can also be a form of play in which children are able to access their creativity to learn new skills and receive education. Play has also been used as a way to experience and improve social skills within a safe construct. One method for helping to demonstrate this is by encouraging empathy defined as the understanding of another person's experience. Research has been conducted that explored the use of the arts as a teaching learning aid and that can help the teaching and learned experience of empathy (Bertling 2015).

It is becoming increasingly necessary to research social functioning among people and although there are many ways to obtain results on such matters, the use of art has become a valid way to explore social constructs. One important social element that has been the focus of research is the act of empathy. Bertling (2015) explored the empathy students display regarding the environment through an ecologically-responsive art education program. By utilizing a seventh grade, public middle school introductory art class, ($N = 20$) as the basis for this arts based study the researcher attempted to determine how students showed empathy within the environment. The students were led through drawing exercises, interviews, focus groups, observations, and visual/verbal journal reviews as a means of measuring empathy. Bertling (2015) reflects upon her dual role and states that this may have skewed the results by potentially promoting a higher quality instruction than a regular classroom would experience. Additionally the researcher bracketed her desire to see positive results in order to lessen the overall impact of this on the study. The data suggests that students displayed increased empathy toward their ecological paradigms, most significantly in their view on ecological waste. Although it is recommended that this research be continued in a longitudinal manner with a general population, it established that art education curricula can promote students' empathy toward the environment.

Play within Special Populations

Play and creativity are key components to children's development within many settings, and are equally effective with special populations, such as children with disabilities. Children with multiple disabilities are more likely to exhibit emotional and behavioral problems. An additional consideration is cultural differences, which should be examined when identifying specific disabilities with children (Johnson, J.L., 2015). For example, children from a multi-

lingual home may be pre-emptively diagnosed with a communication disorder as it may take them longer to process the information in a different language. Another important thing to remember when working with children identified with disability is that the concept of disability is also not a universal consideration. Play therapy has been used among children with disabilities who face social-emotional issues, maintain poor social skills, have low self-esteem, and poor emotional and behavioral regulation (Johnson, J.L., 2015). Group play therapy is often suggested as the recommended intervention technique as it can emphasize the benefits received from therapist-guided peer interactions.

Gronna, Serna, Kennedy, and Prater (1999) explored the importance of play by promoting social skills with the use of puppetry and script-training. They investigated whether there would be visible improvement of social interactions in a child with severe visual impairments during play by expanding on previous research. Susie, a 30-month-old girl with severe esotropia, was enrolled in an integrated preschool with four of her classmates without disabilities, whose ages ranged from 26 to 37 months. All of the children that were involved in the study participated in puppet script training 30 minutes of each 50-minute session, using four puppets with a social skills instructor. The social skills targeted were: (a) greeting, (b) response to a greeting, (c) response to a verbal initiation of a conversation, (d) verbal initiation of the child approached conversation, and (e) verbal initiation of a peer approached conversation. Observations of the child's behaviors were measured on a rated scale by Susie's two teachers before and after the training. Results show that Susie made significant improvement in measurable social skills however, limitations of this study's overall design, specifically related to Susie's shift to a different social skill after 100% completion of the former, may have skewed the results. Gronna's et al. (1999) research supports that using a structured learning approach such as

puppet script training of social skills followed by play can positively effect a child's prosocial behaviors.

Katz and Girolametto (2013) also observed the social interactions of preschool children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) to explore the possibility of improved interactions when a peer-mediated model of intervention is conducted. Throughout previous research it is noted that children with ASD do not interact with their peers when compared to other children. Katz and Girolametto (2013) replicated a study in order to expand on the previous findings by addressing the frequency and length of social engagements of the children with ASD and also testing the intervention in a day care center. The design of the study included a single-subject multiple baseline design with three participants who evaluate the effects of the program used with the children. Nine children ($N = 9$) participated: three students ($n = 3$) diagnosed with ASD, age ranged was between 4.1 and 5.1 years old; along with and two typically developing peers partnered with the child diagnosed with ASD who were nominated by the three educators ($N=6$). The intervention used puppetry in the retelling of a children's book to further communication between the children. Throughout the process, the researchers and educators observed and measured the level of engagement of the children's interactions while tracking eye contact, smiling, and verbalization with a peer. The results were compared with observations of the children with ASD by the educators made prior to the conducting of the study. Results of the intervention showed two of the three children with ASD were within one standard deviation of the mean, while the other's language and socialization standard scores were below two standard deviations from the mean. Katz and Girolametto (2013) concluded the intervention improved the social interactions of the children with ASD. Katz and Girolametto (2013) also stated that further exploration may prove useful due to the limitations set such as the appearance of more than one

caregiver per child and whether the intervention can be replicated with children with similar contexts to ASD.

Both studies emphasize the significance behind play and art in skill-learning amongst children within disability. It is important to continue research revolving around the effect children's play and art-making can have and whether these processes can be influenced or influence the child to better understand the child itself.

Expressive Arts in Play Therapy

Art, music, drama, poetry, dance, and other expressive modalities have been used broadly within play therapy. Although these expressive modalities have often been used as tools added to the play therapist's repertoire, it has yet to be used as an integrative part of the therapy (Byers, J.G., 2015). An expressive arts play therapist's role is to engage with their clients in a way that cannot be achieved within normal talk therapy. It is difficult to make a clear distinction between play therapy and expressive therapy, but the difference is often seen in the approach of the therapist when working with the client (Byers, J.G., 2015). For example, the expressive therapist pays close attention to the actual playing and doing or creating of a client to enhance the child's overall experience within the therapy in an effort to provide evidence of the work being done. Creating is something believed to give more depth to the therapeutic exploration is what distinguishes expressive art play therapists from others who use play therapy (Byers, J.G., 2015). Throughout a session that uses the expressive arts in play therapy, the therapist is attempting to marry the two together. There is an emphasis on creating something when expressive arts are utilized in a play therapy session. While expressive modalities in play therapy has been researched, but there is little to none on the use of expressive arts within play therapy that requires further study (Byers, J.G., 2015).

The Expressive Therapies Continuum

The ETC is a framework designed to organize different art media and activities following a developmental theory of image formation and information processing. The ETC is arranged in a hierarchical order containing four levels of complex processing reference needed – who says this. The three levels established at the start of the ETC are considered complementary and signify bipolar methods of information processing. The fourth level is the creative level (which can occur during any other level of the ETC and denotes the incorporation of functioning from all levels (Lusebrink, 2010).

As conveyed in the ETC, the Kinesthetic/Sensory level is the first, seemingly most basic form the creative process takes. This level is also known for information processing that occurs before the verbal stages and is more commonly seen in young children (Hinz, 2009). Within the therapeutic context, Lusebrink (2010) characterizes the kinesthetic component with behaviors such as restless movement and a lack of boundaries or limits. This can be seen through activities like scribbling, disregard for materials, and in some cases a lack of energy and motivation. The opposing level for the creative process, the sensory level, emphasizes the exploration of materials through sensory means. A client excelling in this form of information processing can be exhibited through sensory sensitivity and an intense concentration that causes movement to slow during the expression involved.

The next level described by the ETC is the Perceptual/Affective phase. The perceptual level of expression is seen when there are clear and defined areas of line formed. The indications of this level can appear in varied ways such as incomplete formations, forms taking geometric shape, and the exaggeration or lack of detail within the expression. According to Lusebrink (2010) the Affective level can be displayed in relation to the perceptual level. For example,

limited affect can be distinguished by little to no use of color and a restricted use of space during creation. The use of hue variety and value gradation in artwork can also indicate affective involvement. When looking from a psychopathological view the indiscriminate use of color or inappropriate color usage for the subject matter is a significant marker used to aid in diagnosis.

The third bipolar level in the ETC is the Cognitive/Symbolic which requires planning, action and recognition in order to gather understanding about complex operations and symbols. Lusebrink (2010) states cognitive integration is utilized within the formation of concepts, problem solving, and the differentiation of objective and abstract expressions. The symbolic aspect of this level includes the recognition of autobiographic symbolic relationships and its integration within the formation of concepts.

The final level of the ETC, the Creative component, is viewed as to be an integrative amongst all other aspects of the ETC. Depending on the subject using the ETC, the creative level can be present within one or all components. This level is unique compared to the others as it covers more than cognitive process, but it also includes the synthesis and self-actualization possibilities within an individual. During an artistic experience, the artist is able to go through at least three types of synthesis: the inner experience and outer reality, the individual and the media used, and the experiential with components of the ETC (Hinz, 2009). Although the ETC appears to be separated by component parts, the Creative level allows the analysis of an individual in a way that integrates the whole, unique person.

ETC Components Amongst the Modalities

Currently there is a small amount of literature documenting the use of the ETC with expressive modalities apart from the visual art therapies. Although visual art therapies have become the primary usage cited in ETC literature, other modalities have been proven as useful

methods for displaying the developmental functioning that is described in the ETC. In the following, established research is detailed as it relates to the bi-polar levels of the ETC and creative modalities.

Art Therapy. At present the most commonly discussed creative arts medium used to describe the ETC is art therapy as it was originally developed by an art therapist and visual art media can take many forms that can be easily interpreted to coincide with levels of the ETC described. For example, art therapy is often thought of as a method for symbolic formation, a key component of the ETC. Isserow (2013) reflects on the importance of symbols and the transformation of art materials when used in a therapeutic relationship by discussing the famed Hellen Keller's experience and the account of a boy diagnosed with severe autism. By comparing the subjects' use of water, Isserow (2013) stipulates that certain interpersonal and intrapersonal skills may be needed developmentally before symbol formation can occur. According to Isserow (2013), however, this development is not restrictive to art therapy and should be explored in other capacities. Creating a symbol can be done consciously and unconsciously, and is something that represents a greater meaning than what is its obvious interpretation. Developmentally, symbolic thought is an acquired skill that coincides with the development of language. Accessing the symbolic level can be difficult for some clients, but basics can be learned when art or literary work that contain symbols is introduced (Hinz, 2009). In this way, the creation of symbols is explored through art.

Music Therapy. Music therapy is often used to address the physical, emotional, cognitive, and social needs of an individual. Recent research has focused on the effects music therapy has on different aspects of one's sensory motor functions (Lusebrink, 2010). Hatampour, Zadehmohammadi, Masoumizadeh, and Sedighi (2011) studied the effects that music has on the

development of sensory motor functions with a handicapped population. In this case study two female participants ($N = 2$) with severe mental disability and severe sensory-motor functioning were observed in 10, one hour music therapy sessions in a four-week period. The participants suffered from severe dysfunction with their hands, legs, and head movements; they were observed before and after the music therapy sessions using the Sensory Motor Questionnaire. Results showed the participants began to move their hands, legs, head, and body and displayed emotional facial expressions as a result of the rhythmic music. Hatampour et al. (2011) concluded that listening to music can promote balance in physical movements and posture and conjure positive emotion. Additional results suggested that music is a valid method for learning social skills and self-confidence. Although it is recommended that this research be continued in a longitudinal manner and with more populations, it does show that the use of music can be used to create a positive relationship to sensory-motor functions. Hatampour et al. (2011) discusses the benefits of music therapy within different populations. The results of their research also show music therapy as a valid intervention that can be related to the ETC.

Dance/Movement Therapy. Another modality for accessing the sensorimotor functions that coincide with the Sensory/Kinesthetic level of the ETC is the use of dance/movement therapy to make kinesthetic connections. Rova (2017) researched the use of both experienced and amateur movers to explore kinesthetic empathy. Rova's basis of exploration was based in dance movement psychotherapy, phenomenology, and cognitive neuroscience. The data used the measurement of the involved motor cortex in processing, the analysis of participants' accounts, and the performance work once completed. To define kinesthetic empathy the themes explored included: (1) kinetic attunement, (2) familiarity, (3) intersubjectivity, (4) socio-political dynamics, (5) embodied knowing, and (6) mirroring. Overall the outcome of the research

suggested that all participants experienced a form of kinesthetic empathy and reported a feeling of acknowledgement from others as they were met at a kinetic and non-verbal state. Rova (2017) discussed the difficulties that appeared when looking at physical movement through a scientific point of view. Rova concluded that an interdisciplinary approach can potentially help with communication between the divisions and help contribute to resources currently available on the subject.

Rova (2017) demonstrates the move of expressive therapies into more clinical fields such as cognitive neuroscience as a means for justifying the benefits of dance/movement therapy. This integration can also be seen among other areas in the expressive therapies. Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence is described as one's use of their whole or parts of their body to solve problems or create (Hinz, 2009). Dancers are able to connect with this sense easily, whereas many others are unaware of the various responses they receive from their body's kinesthetic information. This causes a lack in effective self-expression, which in turn furthers the argument made by Rova that Dance/Movement therapy can be utilized as an aid in sensory functions within the brain.

Drama Therapy. The use of dramatic techniques and philosophies within the therapeutic context has continued to influence the clinical field. Currently, trends in drama therapy there is a reflect and link an approach related to neuroscience (Frydman 2016). Furthermore in the field there is a debate regarding the influence the therapeutic process and cognition. Frydman (2016) explored the relationship between drama therapy and cognitive neuropsychology by suggesting role theory and executive functioning are similar constructs and argued this will aid the field in developing future models. Frydam (2016) established a link between role theory, which involves processing and the response to the surrounding environment. Role theory is related closely as executive functioning within cognitive neuropsychology. The benefits of connecting drama

therapy with cognitive neuropsychology include giving drama therapists the opportunity to have a better understanding behind neuropsychological functions present and neuropsychologists can gain more insight into alternative treatment methods.

Through the lens of brain functioning, the ETC can be interpreted as the two hemispheres of the brain (Lusebrink, 2004). The left side of the continuum represents processing information in an organized fashion, and the right side represents where emotional and conceptual information is processed (Hinz, 2009). This theory suggests other creative arts modalities could also explore neuropsychological functions and test the applications of the ETC.

Although the application of the ETC among expressive therapy modalities has not been extensively researched, it is clear that these modalities provide unique insight into many components described on the ETC. Further research and exploration should be considered to truly determine how these modalities can be integrated within the framework of the ETC. The Creative level of the ETC integrates the artistic process and promotes self-actualizing growth by exploring different cognitive processes (Hinz, 2009). Creativity, as it is defined by modern society, does not label it as a skill that is unique but one that occurs along with process such as working memory and decision making (Hinz, 2009). Children are able to show themselves through their art as they begin to explore and understand themselves and their individual needs. It is not required of children to be particularly skillful in order to be creative, but working among the Creative level of the ETC allows them to take risks and express themselves freely.

Method

Four methods were devised to aid children in the exploration of various levels of the ETC through the creative process. *Implementing the Expressive Therapies Continuum* was used as a template in the designing of this experiential (Graves-Alcorn & Kagin, 2017).

Participants

The therapeutic initiatives developed in this method were carried out in a therapeutic day school setting for children with neurologic and emotional disabilities, where clients frequently presented with behavioral disturbances. Graves-Alcorn and Kagin's (2017) initiatives were designed as a system for fostering creativity and imagination, the initiatives were utilized with up to seven children ($N = 7$) over the course of four separate group therapy sessions. The ages of the children spanned from seven to nine years and group attendance fluctuated daily dependent on the overall program attendance of the day. The group took place during the second to last period of the day during the children's regular schedule. According to this daily schedule, before the group took place, the children attended a 30-minute art session facilitated by the children's primary teachers. The overall content of the group took place within a span of about 25-30 minutes. This consisted of a short opening greeting to the group, explanation of the directive, the performed directive, and a brief closing interview. Participation in the directive was given about 25 minutes to complete. Following the observed group, the group members then returned to their regular scheduled activity of "Storytime" which consisted of a support staff member of the site reading selected material while the children were encouraged to quietly listen and draw or color.

Approach

Four exercises were chosen from Graves-Alcorn and Kagin's (2017) list of initiatives that are related to the ETC. The format of the four-week program that was created followed the hierarchy of the ETC and started from the most accessible bipolar level and continued to upper more complex level: kinesthetic/sensory → perceptual/affective → cognitive/symbolic. The final session implemented an exercise that utilized all levels of the ETC in an effort to observe the children's preferential choice in functioning component.

Materials

The initiatives incorporated mixed media methods after exploring the concept of media dimension variables such as reinforcement value of art-making as a therapeutic process, the idea that all individuals have the ability to be creative, art media can be classified and apparent, and media dimensions can be applied therapeutically (Graves-Alcorn & Kagin, 2017). The components consisted of task directions, which ranged from the use of prescribed materials for a finished product to a free use of materials in an open ended product with limited explanations given.

Procedure

Each session opened with a brief greeting directed toward the group's mascot puppet applying a designated "silly voice" for the purpose of practicing the utilization of imagination. This process helped encourage the participants' creativity and prepare them for the activities proceeding. In a 30-minute session, the directives provided included intermodal expressive therapy transitions and on occasions where many objectives or products were to be completed, the children were given specific time limits to adhere to. At the start of each session the children were given all task directives before being given the materials necessary for the exercise.

Exercise 1: Expressions in Movement and Sound. This exercise was designed with the intent of accessing all levels of the ETC, specifically focused on the kinesthetic/sensory components (Graves-Alcorn & Kagin, 2017). Thus, the suggested materials used for this process included large crayons, newsprint (12 x 18), and various percussive instruments. However, due to environmental and time constraints, changes were made to the original materials list and children were given three pieces of standard (8 x 11) white paper and a handful of markers, while encouraged to use their own bodies or voice as instruments. The directive began with the

participants sitting on the floor pretending to be two years old while scribbling on the paper provided. After this, group participants were made aware of the sounds and movements they were making while scribbling. Following this the children were directed in an intermodal transfer by having them stand with their scribbles at their feet and make a sound that expressed their drawing. One at a time, each child shared their musical creation. Finally, the children were positioned in a circle facing each other where the facilitator directed each child's participation in an overall orchestra. By asking the children to engage in the scribbling act, this accesses a regressive nature that helps to reawaken sensorimotor play (Graves-Alcorn & Kagin, 2017). The creative level of the ETC is achieved when the children are directed to create a sound to correspond with their drawings by using divergent thinking. Idea generation occurs as the kinesthetic is connected to the sensory. Another activation of the creative level occurs when the group must use a form of problem solving skills while working together to create a unified rhythm (Graves-Alcorn & Kagin, 2017).

Exercise 2: Mandala, the Great Round. This directive was designed to coordinate with the perceptual/affective and cognitive/symbolic level of the ETC (Graves-Alcorn & Kagin, 2017). Materials required for this included a circular template with space outside the circle and oil pastels. In addition, participants were also provided colored markers as an option for creative material as the use of oil pastels had not been previously introduced. The facilitator gave further insight into what the circle shape may represent (i.e. a circle often represents life) and how it relates to a mandala before allowing the children to create their own mandalas with limited to no other directives. After completion, the participants were encouraged to name or title their creations.

The act of creating and coloring a mandala involves the usage of both hemispheres of the brain. Logic is used in the way we color forms while creativity is used when selecting colors to implement (Graves-Alcorn & Kagin, 2017). This activity also incorporates vision and fine motor skills. Coloring can also result in the relaxation of the brain's amygdala which directly relates to the experience of stress. The activation of the creative level of the ETC occurs throughout the creation of the mandala as group participants are challenged with what to put inside the circle provided and a creative flow begins to appear as each decision made leads to another (Graves-Alcorn & Kagin, 2017).

Exercise 3: Persona Masks—Anima and Animus-the Shadow Self. The cognitive/symbolic level of the ETC was utilized in the third exercise (Graves-Alcorn & Kagin, 2017). Mixed media items such as glue, scissors, colored paper, paint, and yarn were used on two dimensional paper eye masks for this initiative. In an effort to not overwhelm the group participants, due to emotional and physical disabilities, the facilitator provided two precut eye masks for each child and the use of colored markers. The directive given was to create two masks showing opposing ideas after being given examples provided by the facilitator. After completion, the children were then asked to put on their masks one at a time and give a small gesture they felt could represent their mask.

This exercise asks group participants to identify conflicting sides of self through the creation of masks as personifications of the unique characteristics associated with each (Graves-Alcorn & Kagin, 2017). Once again, the creative level of the ETC was activated in the decision making process of this initiative.

Exercise 4: The Bridge (Bridge the Opposites). This exercise incorporated all levels of the ETC: kinesthetic/sensory, perceptual/affective, and cognitive/symbolic (Graves-Alcorn &

Kagin, 2017). This was chosen for the method in order to clearly see preferential choice of ETC involvement amongst the participants. The facilitator described and explained the use of a symbol and form through an example. The children were each provided a small portion of clay in order to shape four different directed symbols: a symbol for where the participant was that day, a symbol for where the participant was going or wanted to be, a symbol of a bridge between the former two forms created, and a small sphere shape to represent themselves to be placed somewhere on the bridge. Once all members of the group were finished, the children were asked to share and show what they had created to the other members.

The bridge is a common symbol within our culture which makes it an easily relatable concept for group participants to create. The creative level of the ETC manifests during this exercise creation of the symbols and making decisions on how to form the elements needed for the directive. The bridge acts as a metaphor to further the creative aspect and encourage problem solving and mobility (Graves-Alcorn & Kagin, 2017).

At the end of each session, children were asked to process their experience by answering questions verbally such as: Was this activity fun? Was any part difficult for you? Easy? How did you feel throughout the activity? After? What do you want to do now/has this inspired you to create something else? The final activity to end the group was participation in a ritual goodbye greeting to the group's mascot puppet in the same "silly voice" used in the opening.

Record Keeping. Recording the outcome of the experience involved the facilitator's observation of the participants throughout the exercise and reflections from supporting staff present in the room. Observations were also recorded immediately following the closing of the group session, as the children were then allowed the opportunity to freely work creatively while a support staff member would read a story as the end of the day routine during what was called

“Storytime.” All recording was done in the form of written progress notes after each session as well as a detailed reporting conducted during on-site supervision. Information collected helped increase the facilitator’s knowledge as it pertained to the overall exploration of the topic and was gathered with other relevant material while abiding with all ethical standards.

Results

Observations

Seven children were observed in four group sessions that utilized the ETC which coincided with the preconceived group goals of helping and teaching the participants to use their imaginations in a safe and positive manner. The focus of these observations included group dynamics during and after activities were performed, use of expressive materials, perceived depth of understanding of directives given, creative level accessibility among participants, and responses to questions pertaining to each exercise.

Exercise 1: Expressions in Movement and Sound. During Exercise 1, the seven group members appeared excited, evident through chattiness and distractibility between the members. Although, this activity involved multiple steps which was not the norm for this group format, all members were able to easily understand the task directives after clarification and simplification. The entirety of this activity was expected to be performed in relative silence as the directive did not give any inclination for speech, it was observed the participants, although focused on the task, were unable to keep comments to a minimum. As the directive was to act as a two-year old, many participants chose to verbalize this through garbled speech during the beginning phase of scribbling without being prompted to do so. During this, the children’s range of kinesthetic energy varied greatly from small meticulous movement to more erratic movements that involved the entirety of the child’s upper body. Another observation made was the transfer between

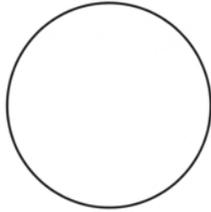
expressive art modalities regarding how easily the children were able to move to a different modality and how difficult it was for the children to perform in that modality as well.

Next, the children were asked to stop their pretend play as two year olds and revert to their actual age. The children were then directed to stand in a circle facing each other with their scribble drawings at their feet. Once in position, the children were to think of a sound to accompany one of the drawings they had created. The participants were able to successfully move to this new directive fairly easily without much confusion as evidenced by the sudden silence and lack of talking amongst them. Although the entire process produced varied creations from the participants, all could complete the initiative. After closing the group, all participants were excited and eager to continue the art making process through their own individual art using the colored markers provided.

During the closing interview, all children expressed their enjoyment of the activity and that the use of dance and music was fun for them. When asked if there was any part they found difficult to complete, one student mentioned difficulty understanding how a two year old might act, but overall found the activity easy to complete.

Exercise 2: Mandala, the Great Round. The facilitator allowed for group interpretation of the meaning of a circle and also provided, “the circle can represent life or the self.” The facilitator then showed examples of mandalas created to describe this and to display the proper use of oil pastels, as it was a new material for the children (Figure 1). When given the option between oil pastels and colored markers, four of five participants chose to use the oil pastels, with one deciding mid-creation to switch to colored markers; making a total of three of five products made with the oil pastels. It was then observed that three of the participants created

very similar concepts to the examples provided by the facilitator, while the others took to the “smudge technique” also displayed in the examples.



Mandala Template



Oil Pastels Example



Markers Example

Figure 1

Mandala Template and Examples Provided.

All group members were able to finish their mandalas and were asked to name or title them. Many of the participants included the word “circle” within their titles: “Circle of Life,” “Days Circle,” and “Circle of Woof.” The group members were easily able to describe their creations to the others present and end the group positively. After the group had closed, many were once again eager to begin creation of their own individual artwork using the materials given as above.

The closing interview given after this exercise revealed the group participants liked the exercise itself, but felt neutral feelings toward creating a title for their work. Out of all aspects of the exercise the children found the making of the title of their creation and the use of the materials to be the most difficult. The members found this main portion of the initiative, creating the mandalas, to be very easy to do and expressed this was because they are used to coloring and drawing and the exercise was not something out of the normal for them to do.

Exercise 3: Persona Masks—Anima and Animus-the Shadow Self. At the beginning of this process, the children ranged in mood from extremely excited to neutral. The activity had been previewed earlier in the day with the children and many were excited with the idea of making masks, often saying things like, “when is your group happening?” “I’m so excited for your group!” or “I wish your group could happen right now.” When presented with the materials for the initiative, two of the six members were visibly and verbally disappointed in the fact that the masks were only eye masks that did not cover the entire face. After explaining the reasoning behind only eye masks due to the time constraints, the children were able to move forward into the process. Before creating the two masks, the facilitator, once again provided examples for the directives such as “happy vs. sad” or “dark vs. light.” It is important to mention the finished products of the children seemed to resemble their peers and that while thinking of their characters, many wanted to create the same concept as another member, but made a small alteration. Three of the six participants created masks related to the concept of hero vs villain: cop/robber, Black Arrow/Green Arrow, and The Flash/Zoom. The three remaining children created masks maintaining vastly different concepts, with one child creating the abstract portrayal of night and day. As a form of intermodal transfer, the children were asked to create gestures to represent their masked personas. The gestures the children created tended not to be abstract concepts and did not reflect any internal changes. After closing the group, almost all the members, including a child who is not a regular participant in the group, were eager to continue the creation of masks, but without the restrictions provided by the facilitator. A child entering Storytime, which did not participate in the group, also requested materials to use from the facilitator.

While reporting for the closing interview of this exercise, the children expressed great excitement to the directives and were eager to participate. The group participants also stated that the activity was not difficult to do, but shared their concern for the time limitations placed at the beginning of the initiative. There was also some hesitation and difficulty when deciding and creating a gesture to go with the masks created in the group.

Exercise 4: The Bridge (Bridge the Opposites). For the final exercise, the directives were previewed with the group members as there were multiple objects that were to be made with the clay. In this exercise, children were asked to create four symbols: a symbol for where the participant was that day, a symbol for where the participant was going or wanted to be, a symbol of a bridge between the former two forms created, and a small sphere shape to represent themselves to be placed somewhere on the bridge. In order to help the children better understand the tasks, the facilitator started with limited instructions as recommended, but deemed it necessary to provide further restrictions and examples, such as limiting the creations to a time span of ten years and encouraging the participants to either take the directive in a literal sense (ex: 7 years old to 17 years old) or abstract view (ex: seed to tree). The group participants seemed to struggle greatly with the idea of creating a symbol of representation. After creating all of the sculptures and symbols, the members were asked to share with the entire group. Four out of the six members were concrete in their artworks that consisted of making numbers related to their ages, while two made visual interpretations of themselves as objects (i.e. sun and tree). It was observed that the time constraint may have limited some participants in their ability to create. Once finished with the group, unlike the previous groups, the children displayed content or neutral feelings toward their creations and did not ask for more materials or show any excitement or inspiration in creativity.

The closing interview was conducted after the activity and during this time the children once again stated the activity was easy to do, but did state they were overall not as interested in the activity and would much rather play with the materials in their own way. The most difficult part of the initiative for the children was creating the many different symbols or forms as instructed by the directive. The group members were not compelled to continue with the provided materials and instead moved onto a new activity.

Summary

At the end of each session the children were asked to respond to questions regarding their overall experience throughout the process. When asked if the activity was fun and what their favorite part was, all participants agreed the session was fun and proceeded to describe all aspects of the initiatives as their favorites. Many mentioned the “drawing part” of each activity to be the most fun and engaging. When asked if any part of the activity was difficult to do, a majority of the children expressed great ease with completing the task, however one student did report difficulty pretending to be a two year old in the first activity. There were also increasing difficulties observed as group sessions continued into higher levels of the ETC when children were asked to make decisions on what to create.

In response to the final question of what activity were they most inspired to do after the group session, a majority often asked for additional materials that were used within the group session to continue creating while abiding by their own directions, with the exception of the last group.

The energy level throughout all directives was relatively high despite the children facing some challenges along the way, with the exception of the final exercise, children showed a genuine interest in completing the tasks. Observations of the children’s behavior throughout and

after the exercises revealed many aspects of the children's ability to be creative within the framework of the ETC.

Discussion

The results reported above are based on this writer's experience and impressions while working with seven children within a therapeutic day school setting while utilizing age-appropriate exercises chosen to coincide with the bipolar levels described by the ETC. The purpose of this was to help foster creativity within children, specifically those struggling with disability. Although the directives chosen were simplified in some manner for usage among those with disability, this writer believes the exercises can be effectively utilized with broader populations as well. The flexible nature of the materials required for direction allows the exercises to be conducted in other settings, but this writer recommends they are facilitated by one who is familiar with the arts. Ideally the directives chosen would reflect the bipolar level of the ETC in which the majority of the group members are able to accomplish as a better opportunity for fostering creativity.

The ongoing usage of activities involving the ETC has shown the potential value in allowing and encouraging the use of imagination and creativity in an appropriate manner for children. Children responded positively to the exercises and seemed to enjoy participating in the process. It is interesting to note, the children were often more energetic when able to experience more than one expressive modality during a group session.

Paulo Knill explains that "it is the nature of play to engage the imagination" (Byers, J.G., 2015). A larger understanding of the expressive arts working with play gives more opportunities for overall psychological integration within the individual. By using the expressive arts within play therapy, the therapist is able to perceive a client's more internal processes (Byers, J.G.,

2015). By using only play therapy techniques, the therapist and client will not be able to engage more symbolic levels of connection, whereas with expressive arts and play therapy combined, more is revealed.

The evidence in this method integrating the ETC justifies further exploration of expressive art practices for children with disabilities as a way to help encourage safe and positive imagination and creativity. Research should continue to broaden the population range to those in older age groups as well as those of different backgrounds. Considerations can also be made toward the form of expressive art modality used in order to better understand and access the creative level in therapy.

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THESIS APPROVAL FORM

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In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.



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