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Effectiveness of Art Therapy in Middle School Children with Emotional Behavioral Problems

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effectiveness of art therapy in addressing emotional and behavioral challenges in middle school children, focusing on its impact on emotional wellbeing and academic performance. A sample of 40 participants identified with emotional and behavioral problems was divided into experimental and control groups. The experimental group underwent eight weeks of structured art therapy sessions, while the control group received no intervention. Data collection utilized the *School Children Problem Scale (SCPS)*, which assesses six key factors: academic problems, peer relationship issues, aggression, anxiety, withdrawal, and antisocial behavior. Statistical analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics and paired t-tests to compare pre- and post-intervention outcomes. Findings revealed that art therapy significantly improved emotional regulation, behavioral adjustment, and social interactions. Participants in the experimental group demonstrated a notable reduction in behavioral issues, particularly in aggression, anxiety, and withdrawal, along with enhanced self-expression, coping strategies, and organizational skills. Improvements were also observed in peer relationships and academic engagement. While gender differences were not statistically significant, qualitative observations suggested that girls exhibited greater engagement and creativity during sessions. These results highlight the potential of art therapy as an effective school-based intervention for children with emotional and behavioral difficulties. By fostering emotional resilience and improving coping mechanisms, art therapy can contribute to students' holistic development. Future research should explore long-term impacts and the scalability of art therapy programs in diverse educational settings.

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of art therapy on the social-emotional and academic achievements of middle school children with emotional and behavioral challenges. In addition, this study investigates the processes that contribute to improvements following structured art therapy interventions. While academic difficulties are often addressed through traditional educational support, emotional and behavioral issues tend to be overlooked in school settings. Many students struggling with emotional dysregulation, anxiety, aggression, and social withdrawal require alternative interventions that extend beyond academic instruction.

Art therapy offers a creative, non-verbal medium for self-expression, allowing children to process emotions, develop coping strategies, and improve peer relationships. This study explores the effectiveness of structured art therapy sessions as an intervention for middle school students, assessing changes in emotional regulation, behavioral adjustment, and academic engagement. By evaluating these effects, the study aims to highlight the potential

role of art therapy in addressing the holistic needs of children with emotional and behavioral challenges, offering schools an alternative means of fostering students' well-being and success.

Literature review

The effectiveness of art therapy in addressing emotional and behavioral challenges among middle school children has been widely studied. Emotional and behavioral difficulties, including aggression, anxiety, and depression, significantly impact children's academic performance and social relationships, often leading to long-term consequences such as school dropout and mental health disorders (Kauffman, 2001; APA, 2023). Research indicates that these challenges are exacerbated by factors such as poverty, outdated educational methods, overcrowded classrooms, and societal pressures, particularly in countries like Pakistan (AP News, 2023; Wall Street Journal, 2023). The increasing prevalence of social media use and academic pressure further contribute to emotional dysregulation among students (Twenge & Campbell, 2018; The Atlantic, 2024). Early intervention is crucial in mitigating these effects, and alternative therapeutic approaches such as art therapy are gaining recognition for their effectiveness in supporting children's emotional and behavioral needs (Moula, 2020).

Art therapy provides a non-verbal and creative medium for self-expression, enabling children to process emotions, reduce anxiety, and develop coping mechanisms (Malchiodi, 2012; National Library of Medicine, 2021). It is particularly beneficial in collectivist cultures where mental health stigma remains a barrier to seeking psychological interventions (Cheng et al., 2020; Carter et al., 2020). The integration of spirituality and family involvement in therapeutic practices makes art therapy a culturally relevant intervention (Hernandez, 2021). The theoretical foundation of art therapy is rooted in Social Development Theory, Humanistic Psychology, and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), which emphasize self-expression, emotional regulation, and problem-solving (Rogers, 1951; Beebe et al., 2010). The Expressive Therapies Continuum (ETC) further explains how art therapy integrates cognitive and sensory processes to facilitate emotional healing (Hinz, 2009).

Studies highlight the long-term benefits of art therapy, including reduced emotional distress, improved self-esteem, and better coping skills (Pifalo, 2007; Malchiodi, 2012). Implementing art therapy in schools fosters resilience, enhances classroom dynamics, and supports students' academic and personal growth, making it a valuable intervention for children with emotional and behavioral challenges (Moula, 2020). Research has shown that children with emotional and behavioral issues often struggle academically, as their difficulties interfere with focus, motivation, and social engagement (ResearchGate, 2018). Teachers report greater concerns about these issues than parents, highlighting the

need for improved communication and collaboration between educators, parents, and mental health professionals to address children's mental health effectively (Wolf, 2020; Malchiodi, 2020).

Art therapy has proven effective in helping children express emotions that may be difficult to articulate verbally (Rubin, 2016). Studies indicate that structured art therapy programs lead to improved emotional stability and greater resilience against stress and anxiety (Jones et al., 2018). Moreover, art therapy has been linked to behavioral improvements, with research showing significant reductions in aggression and noncompliant behaviors among middle school students (Belgrave & Thompson, 2020). Engaging in artistic activities allows children to explore alternative methods of self-expression, reducing stress and promoting self-regulation. Additionally, research has demonstrated that group art therapy fosters peer relationships and social cohesion among middle school students by encouraging collaboration, sharing, and effective communication through creative activities (Parker, Dagnall, & Munafò, 2017).

The long-term impact of art therapy has been explored in various studies, with findings indicating that its benefits persist even after therapy ends (Smith, Zhen, & Brown, 2021). Participants continue to show improvements in emotional resilience, self-confidence, and overall mental well-being (American Art Therapy Institute, 2017). Integrating art therapy with psychological and medical treatments has been particularly effective in reducing emotional and behavioral challenges in children (Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 2024). Furthermore, research has shown that engaging in creative activities activates different brain areas, reducing stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms while fostering self-reflection and resilience.

Theoretical foundations, including cognitive-behavioral theory, developmental psychology, and the ecological model, emphasize the role of thought patterns, creative expression, and environmental influences in emotional growth. Studies highlight significant improvements in students' ability to manage emotions, behavior, and peer relationships. However, the integration of art therapy into school settings requires collaboration among teachers, counselors, and therapists. While challenges such as resource availability remain, the benefits of art therapy in promoting mental well-being and academic success make it a valuable intervention (Christian, 2023; Regev & Snir, 2023). Future research should explore the long-term outcomes and broader implementation strategies for integrating art therapy into educational settings. Despite its proven benefits, standardization in therapy protocols remains an area for further investigation (Kamps et al., 2015). Most studies focus on short-term outcomes, necessitating longitudinal research to assess the lasting impact of art therapy (Holmes et al., 2015). Additionally, the role of culturally tailored interventions remains underexplored, despite their potential to enhance

engagement and effectiveness (Snir et al., 2023).

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a quasi-experimental research design using an A-B-A (Pre-assessment, Intervention, Post-assessment) framework. The purpose was to evaluate the effectiveness of Art Therapy in managing emotional and behavioral problems in 6th-grade children. The intervention focused on structured art therapy techniques aimed at addressing specific emotional and behavioral concerns, aligning with previous research methodologies in therapeutic interventions.

Sample Description

A random sampling technique was used to select participants from schools. Initially, students were screened using the School Children Problem Scale (SCPS; Saleem & Mahmood, 2010). The age range of the students was 11-12 years (M = 12.03, SD = 1.20). A total of 40 students were selected (20 boys, 20 girls) based on their high scores on SCPS.

Inclusion Criteria

- Only 6th-grade students (boys and girls) were included.
- Students scoring high on the School Children Problem Scale were selected for the study.

Exclusion Criteria

- Students with severe physical or psychological disabilities were excluded.
- Orphans or children from single-parent households were excluded to maintain uniformity in family structure.

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of Participants (N=40)

Age	M	SD
11-13	12.03	1.20

Table 1 reveal age range of the student was 11-13 years where the Mean age was 12.03 and Stander Daviataion was 1.20.

Demographic Characteristics

A demographic breakdown of the participants is provided in Table 2.

Table 2: Demographic Information of Participants (N=40)

Characteristic	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Boys	33	55
Girls	27	45
Family System		
Joint	31	52
Nuclear	29	48
Birth Order		
1 st	27	45

2 nd	21	35
3 rd	4	7
4 th	4	7
5 th	3	5
6 th	1	2
Number of Siblings		
1	4	7
2	9	15
3	17	28
4	22	37
5	6	10
6	2	3

Assessment Measures

The **School Children Problem Scale (SCPS; Saleem & Mahmood, 2010)** was used to assess emotional and behavioral problems. This scale consists of **44 items** with **six subscales**:

- Anxiousness ($\alpha = .87$, 23 items)
- Academic Problems ($\alpha = .84$, 16 items)
- Aggression ($\alpha = .84$, 15 items)
- Social Withdrawal ($\alpha = .83$, 15 items)
- Rejection ($\alpha = .70$, 10 items)
- Psychosomatic Complaints ($\alpha = .76$, 9 items)

Proposed Intervention Plan

The intervention consisted of **7-8 structured sessions**, including:

- Rapport-building sessions
- Pre-assessment sessions
- Art Therapy interventions (Free Drawing, Visual Journaling, Mask Making, Emotion Wheel)
- Follow-up sessions

Each session lasted 35-40 minutes and focused on understanding emotions, reviewing emotional reactions, and incorporating creative expression through art.

Procedure of Data Collection

1. Permissions: Approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), school administrators, and scale authors.
2. Pre-Assessment: The SCPS was administered to 54 students. Only those scoring in the mild to moderate range ($n=30$) were included in the intervention phase.
3. Intervention: Participants exhibiting Aggression and Social Withdrawal received art therapy. Goals were set based on SCPS scores, and structured sessions were conducted in groups.
4. Post-Assessment: The SCPS was re-administered to evaluate the effectiveness of art therapy in reducing symptoms. A paired-sample t-test was used to analyze the pre- and post-

intervention data.

Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS Version 26. Statistical methods included:

- Descriptive statistics (Mean, Standard Deviation, Frequency, Percentage)
- Paired sample t-tests to assess intervention effectiveness

Ethical Considerations

- Informed consent was obtained from students and their guardians.
- Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was ensured.
- Data was anonymized, and students were provided with mental health resources if needed.

Limitations

- Individual differences and therapist experience may influence art therapy effectiveness.
- The study focused only on rural-area children; results may not be generalizable.
- Future research should include different age groups to assess broader impacts.

Implications

- Sensitizing school authorities to emotional and behavioral challenges in students.
- Helping children manage emotions through structured art therapy interventions.
- Reducing disruptive behaviors by offering creative emotional outlets.
- Enhancing social interaction through group-based therapy.
- Improving academic focus and engagement by addressing emotional distress.

Results

This chapter highlighted the findings of the current research project by conducting following phases.

Phase I: Intervention Phase

This section deals with Pre and Post Intervention Results

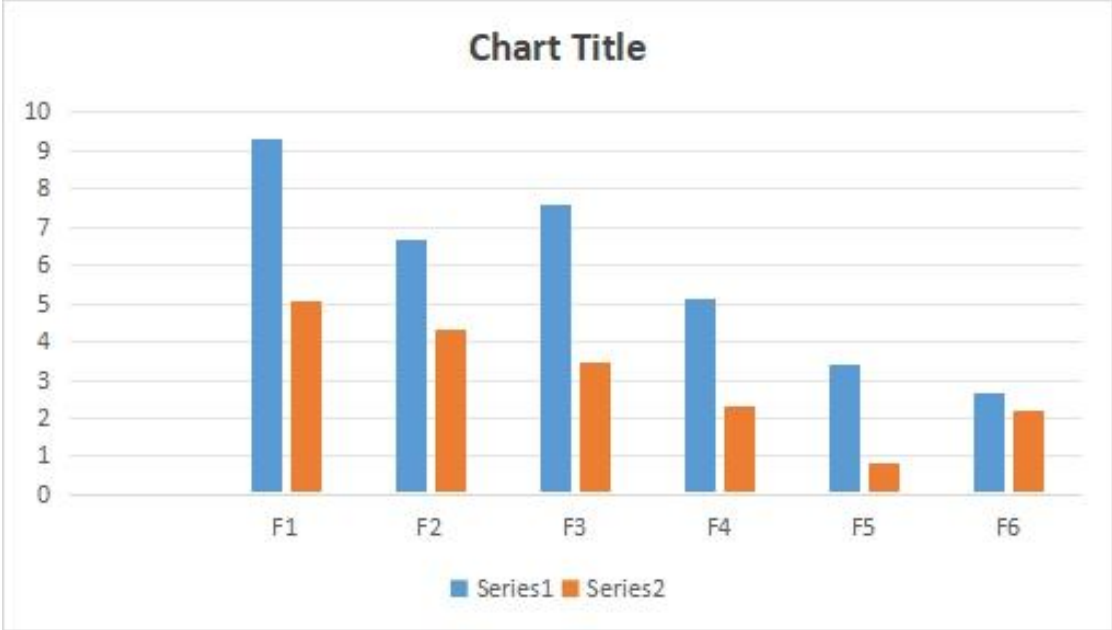
Table 3: *Paired Sample t Test of Emotional Behaviour of School Children N=40*

Variables	Pre_Assessment (N=40)		P0st_Assessment (N=40)		T	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD		
F1: Anxiousness	9.31	5.80	5.07	2.95	4.92***	0.92
F2:Academic Problems	6.68	4.44	4.31	2.98	3.29***	0.63
F3: Aggression	7.60	4.97	3.48	2.52	6.54***	1.04
F4:Social Withdrawal	5.12	3.31	2.34	2.04	4.90***	1.011
F5:Rejection	3.39	3.56	.804	1.22	4.60***	0.97
F6:	2.68	1.75	2.21	2.30	.986	0.22

Psychosomatic Problems					
Total	3.48	18.39	11.13	5.99***	0.99
	17.93				

The paired sample t-test results showed significant improvements in children's emotional and behavioral well-being after the intervention. **Anxiousness, academic problems, aggression, social withdrawal, and feelings of rejection** all significantly decreased, indicating better focus, emotional regulation, and peer interactions. However, **psychosomatic issues** showed minimal change, suggesting the need for further targeted interventions. All the findings confirm the intervention's effectiveness, particularly in reducing emotional distress and improving social adjustment.

Pre_Assessment & Post_Assessment In Figure



Figure; Graphical presentation of score of Pre and Post Assessment on sub scale and total scale School Children Problems Scale

The chart compares pre- and post-assessment scores for emotional and behavioral factors in school children. It shows a significant reduction in **anxiousness, academic problems, aggression, social withdrawal, and rejection** after the intervention, indicating its effectiveness. However, **psychosomatic problems** showed minimal improvement. The visual confirms that the intervention had the most impact on **aggression, anxiousness, and social withdrawal** while physical symptoms linked to emotional distress may need additional support

Discussion

Art therapy has been shown to effectively help middle school children (ages 10–14) manage emotional and behavioral issues. This study found that structured art therapy sessions significantly reduced anxiety, aggression, social withdrawal, rejection, and academic struggles among students. Activities like mindful coloring

and visualization helped students feel calmer, improving their focus and reducing excessive worry (Malchiodi, 2020; Rubin, 2005). Art-based goal-setting and creative learning techniques enhanced motivation and organization, aligning with Erikson's psychosocial theory (Slayton et al., 2010). Techniques like emotion mapping and storytelling allowed students to express emotions positively, supported by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (Bushman & Anderson, 2002). Group art activities fostered peer relationships, reducing social withdrawal and rejection, consistent with Bowlby's attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988). Stress-related physical symptoms, such as headaches, improved moderately through relaxation techniques, aligning with the biopsychosocial model (Engel, 1977). Overall, this study confirms the therapeutic value of art therapy in enhancing emotional regulation, social skills, and academic performance in middle school children. Future research should explore integrating art therapy with other interventions for greater effectiveness (Malchiodi, 2020; Luby et al., 2019).

Conclusion

This study has addressed the significant impact of art therapy on the emotional and behavioral problems of middle school children. Results showed that anxiety, aggression, social withdrawal, rejection, and academic problems are essential features of school children's emotional and behavioral challenges. These findings align with previous research, emphasizing the effectiveness of structured art interventions in improving emotional regulation, peer interactions, and academic engagement. While psychosomatic complaints showed only a slight improvement, the overall reduction in problem behaviors highlights the therapeutic benefits of art-based interventions. Problems such as anger, aggression, social withdrawal, and psychosomatic symptoms, commonly found in other psychological measures, were also observed as integral aspects of children's mental health issues in this study. This suggests that such problems might be core expressions of distress across cultures. With both core and culture-specific manifestations of emotional and behavioral problems in SCPS, the accuracy of assessing and addressing mental health concerns in school children can be enhanced. This study could serve as a fundamental tool in determining the prevalence of these issues, allowing for a more precise understanding of their magnitude and informing future intervention strategies.

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