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Art as a Language for Children in Need

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When people think of art, masters and masterpieces often spring to mind. In this article, art is considered in its fundamental sense - as a language written in images. Art involves visual thinking and the use of imagery rather than language for the construction, articulation, and expression of thoughts and feelings. For children whose language skills are still developing, image writing is the best means of expression. This article reveals the significance of image thinking and the biological origin of art making. A case study is used to illustrate how art can help children in need.

Sight Comes Before Words

Of the five senses, neuroscientists have found vision to be the most complex and richest (Restak, 1994). In his book Descartes' Error, Damasio (1994) explains in detail the vibrant role played by visual perception in our mind in terms of cognitive and emotional aspects. ‘Images are probably the main content of our thoughts (p. 107),’ he claims, ‘both words and arbitrary symbols are based on topographically organized representations and can become images. Most of the words we use in our inner speech, before speaking or writing a sentence, exist as auditory or visual images in our consciousness (p. 106).’ Art making is image making, and as our thoughts exist mainly in imagery, artistic creation is undeniably a valuable way to represent both thoughts and feelings. This is particularly so for children whose cognitive and emotional development largely depends on their visual perception.

Young children, given a pen, appear compelled to draw. They get excited about exploring lines and forms on a surface. Anthropologists hypothesize that art making has a biological origin in human evolution. Alland (1997) claims that art evolved as a kind of exploratory play in which the external world is searched and manipulated by the inner world of the imagination. Art making not only enhanced our visual acuity and hand-eye coordination, which were significant in the evolutionary development of Homo Sapiens, but also supported a highly developed capacity for pattern recognition and symbol association – both of which are crucial to the appearance of written languages (pp. 22-26). Likewise, Dissanayake (1995) redefines art, as found in rituals, as a unique human behaviour of “making special”. She explains that art and ritual in primitive cultures can be understood as a way that ancient people allayed their anxiety in response to life’s uncertainties. Modern philosophy of art and aesthetics also hints at the biological origin of art appreciation.

Dutten (2009) notices that specific elements in a landscape such as open spaces of grasses, the presence of water and a distant horizon evoke intrinsic pleasure in humans across different cultures. These shared responses to ‘preferred landscapes’ are signs of atavism. The preferred landscape is characterized by two features, coherence and legibility, that promote orientation and invite exploration. Dutten also argues that art appreciation appeared first as an evolutionary adaptation. All these aforementioned hypotheses and arguments indicate that art is not exclusive for the talented, but rather an innate behaviour of which we are all capable.

The Quality of ‘Aboutness’

According to the neuroscientist Churchland (1995), ‘the vast majority of our cognitive activities take place at levels well below the conscious level’ (p. 182). Spontaneity induces flows of thought that can slip under the guard of our consciousness. Artistic creativity of any kind involves a different degree of spontaneity, and thus often provides information that reveals the unconscious. Nonetheless art making is a self-directed process. The dynamic flow between the conscious and the unconscious during a creative process is described by Allen (1977): ‘Our response to art is a unique combination of emotion and subconscious cognitive activity. Art makes the subconscious symbolic system real and objectively present’ (p. 20). Art is primarily about emotion rather than rationality. It relies on senses rather than intellectual ability and thus applies to all walks of life. Take drawing as an example. The artist’s colours, lines, forms choices and the final composition are all directed by his or her state of mind at the time of execution. Whatever is within is transformed into kinetic forms of expression through brushstrokes, line rhythms, colour intensity and tones and compositional arrangement - with or without the artist’s consciousness. Art making is indeed a symbolic practice that has a quality of ‘aboutness’ (ibid 1995). Once an image is made, what was once internal has been physically manifested. It can be seen, and thus prompts a change in the artist from an unconscious to a conscious state (Schaverien 1988).

Art and Childhood Trauma

Children are less able than adults to face adversity. This is particularly so for children who sustain traumatic experiences such as family violence and chronic illness. Given that their cognitive ability and language skills are still developing, many of the issues arising from
their situation are incomprehensible. These children are often confused and living with complex emotions - fear, anger, guilt and sadness - that are literally ‘unspeakable’. These accumulated repressed emotions can affect their development, particularly their self-regulation, self-concept and interpersonal functioning (Cloitre et al., 2009). Without early intervention, many of these children will develop personality and behavioural disorders as they grow older (Bennett et al. 2005; van der Kolk 2005). A fundamental focus of intervention for these children is to help them liberate and visualize their inner feelings, and art in the forms of play and image writing is best suited to this purpose.

‘Children need to have the opportunity to process traumatic experiences in a manner consistent with their cognitive and emotional development (Arvidson et al. 2011, p.38).’ As a form of play, art creates a non-verbal platform for children to disclose and develop their abstract thinking and feelings in images. The process of art making provides them with a self-directed, joyful platform that is safe and natural to project their feelings under the guise of play. The ways in which they create, and the final products, reveal their perceptions of the world. These images can then facilitate our understanding of their developmental needs, allowing us to help them release the repressed emotions – a process that enhances their self-esteem and promotes their ability to manage feelings and problem-solve.

Visualization of What’s Within

A one-year art therapy programme was conducted for eight child victims of family violence in 2013. Y was an 11-year-old girl whose parents had separated, and she was living with her father when she enrolled in the programme. Two weeks before the programme started, Y’s father committed suicide and she had to move back in with her mother who had previously abused her. Given the very intense and complex reality, she had great difficulty understanding and expressing herself. The programme helped her vent and visualize her hidden emotions, and gain a better understanding of her reality. The focus of this article is not the overall art therapy process, but rather some images of Y’s work that illustrate how art helped her to voice her otherwise muted inner emotions.

Y appeared to be calm in the first few individual sessions, and it was decided that she was in denial of her father’s death. In the first session, she chose to do free drawing and started looking for a black pen, explaining that black was her favourite colour. No black pen was available, so Y picked purple and mixed it with other colours to outline her image (Drawing 1), a monster with two heads sharing one body and four feet that were webbed like ducks. She then drew a bold line dividing it in half, one half coloured in purple and the other in blue. She narrated that the monster had been split by a cut, and although both halves survived, she stressed that the splitting had really hurt. Later, she added a patch of substance right below the purple head, concluding that this half had a running nose and the separation was a good thing.

In the second session, Y drew a story about a zoo during the time when things were being moved to a new site (Drawing 2). She started with a black marker and drew a cage inhabited by a ‘Giraffe’ (aged 59) and a small ‘Hamster’ (1 month old) in separate compartments. Y narrated that all animals except these two were leaving. Giraffe had been abandoned because it was too big to be moved. Hamster, as Giraffe’s best friend, had decided to stay. Hamster became agitated whenever humans came close. In the right upper corner, Y drew an 80-year-old person pushing a grumbling lion toward a truck. Interestingly, Y did not put Giraffe and Hamster next to one another. Instead, they were distanced by an empty compartment in between. Finally, Y made some ‘food’ with yellow playdough to feed the animals. In the following session, Y worked on a new zoo in water colours (Drawing 3). In her own narrative, the bottom

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1When her case social worker asked her how she felt about her father’s death, Y answered: “I’d take it as he would be sleeping for a very long period.”
green area was a land filled with spikes and the blue stood for Mother tortoise and her baby son. Mother Tortoise had been wounded by the spikes and was bleeding and crying as her baby tried to comfort her with hugs. On the right was a light green giraffe, and Y did not specify whether it was a new giraffe or not. She said it was crying and used her fingers to paint the tears in blue dots.

Y’s choice of black and her narration of a zoo and animals are unusual images for a child. They were full of negative implications – darkness, splitting, separation, segregation, loneliness, anger, wounds and tears - all of which elicit vivid, tragic feelings. Confusion and conflict were also expressed by the lack of definite heads and tails, and the extreme contrasts in size and age among her characters. The food she made might imply nurturing, specifically a fulfilment of her emotional needs. Given Y’s reality, her stories were undeniably connected to her suffering. Her narration of the ‘separation’ was symbolic of the pain and confusion created by her own loss that was too difficult for a child of her age to articulate. Her creations helped her channel her inner feelings in a detached way. Neuroscientists have found that repressed memories have strong sensorimotor and highly visual qualities. Thus, the best way to access traumatic memories is through non-verbal visual means such as drawing, given their visual and spontaneous nature (Greenburg & van der Kolk, 1987). This was evidenced by another of Y’s work - a paper clay cat. She became increasingly silent and totally absorbed in the process of smoothing the surface of her cat. Only when she realised that the session was close to ending did she quickly make a bed, a red pillow, a black blanket and a ball. Drawing 4 is her presentation, a cat in a bed on a red pillow with a ball stuffed in its mouth. In the following session, Y admitted that when she was making the cat, memories of her father’s funeral entered her mind. She remembered standing still in a very cold room where her father was lying in his coffin on a red pillow. Her mother had stuffed something into her father’s mouth. It was the first time Y had talked about the funeral in such detail. Before the art sessions, neither she nor the art therapist would have expected a breakthrough such as this. It was probably the action of smoothing the paper clay that triggered thoughts of caressing and the associated emotional memories of her father.

Clinical reports of child abuse in which drawing is adopted as part of treatment, confirm that ‘art work can provide a vehicle for bringing even deeply repressed trauma to the surface where it can be balanced by the outer world’ (Stember & Halpert 1980, pp.59-63). Y’s images helped her to visualize and acknowledge her inner feelings, and this is the very first step to help children whose suffering is difficult to articulate. Her case shows how art can help children in need.

References