

# Writing-Images

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## Abstract

*In the art educational therapy (AET) method introduced in this article, school coursework is integrated into art therapy with the aim of facilitating such learning and enhancing the emotional well-being of children with learning difficulties who have experienced stress or trauma. A grounded theory research study based on the cases of 5 middle school children identified “writing-images” in which children experiment with drawn forms of letters and numbers prior to learning to read. Opportunities to work with writing-images in AET enable the child to reclaim the learning potential of an early developmental “writing-image” phase.*

## Introduction

The aim of the research described in this article was to design, study, and test a therapeutic method that would facilitate coursework learning as well as enhance the emotional well-being of children with learning difficulties who had experienced stress or trauma (Ottarsdottir, 2005). In this article, “learning difficulties” refers to difficulties in mastering school coursework for a variety of reasons.<sup>1</sup> A result of the study is a new therapeutic method, which I have named “art educational therapy” (AET). In AET, coursework is integrated into art therapy within the conceptual frameworks of both art therapy and educational therapy. Educational therapy as applied in AET is a therapeutic method that combines psychological insight with a focus on the emotional blocks that impair learning (e.g., Beaumont, 1991; Caspari Foundation, n.d). In AET, artwork serves as a basis for integrating such coursework into art therapy as reading, writing, spelling, mathematics, geography, poetry, and foreign language learning.

The importance of a “writing-image stage” in an educational and art therapeutic context was identified in the study, as well as the value of creating a way to regress educationally to that phase. “Writing-image” refers to drawn forms of letters and numbers. The writing-image stage

<sup>1</sup>The term “specific learning difficulties” has been applied in earlier publications (Ottarsdottir, 2009) for the phenomenon that “learning difficulties” describes here.

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takes place when children make writing-images before learning to read. “Educational regression” describes the situation when a child goes back to earlier educational activity that he or she has missed or forgotten (Barrett & Trevitt, 1991). In AET, the writing-image functions both as drawing within an art therapy approach where children work with their emotional conflicts and also as a place for educational regression in support of coursework learning.

## Review of the Literature

### Art Educational Therapy

Art Educational Therapy (AET) is comprised of art therapy, educational therapy, and additional AET factors. The method is, to a large degree, psychodynamically oriented art therapy in which children spontaneously make art in order to work through their emotional conflicts (e.g., Rubin, 1999). Educational therapy plays an important role in AET to explain the relationship between the emotional conflicts caused by stress or trauma and learning difficulties (e.g., Beaumont, 1991). Certain elements that were specifically designed, studied, and tested through the research, such as the writing-image, are unique to the AET method and are not generally found in art therapy or educational therapy.

In AET children freely choose what to work with in terms of art materials and coursework, and they are given space to discuss whatever topic they desire. The art materials are kept on the table beside them, so they may reach for them and begin to draw spontaneously if desired. If assistance is requested with specific coursework, I may suggest certain techniques to integrate the coursework into therapy through art making. In some cases children spontaneously integrate coursework into their drawings.

### Writing-Images

Just before learning to read and understanding the exact meaning and sound of letters, many children experiment with drawing letterforms. These children will draw writing-images in which they make images out of letters, draw marks that look like letters, and integrate pictorial images and letterforms.

Previous research has identified the learning involved when children draw writing-images before they are introduced to adult orthography at school (Campbell, 2004; Czerniewska, 1992; Kress, 2000; Matthews, 2003; Ottarsdottir, 2004). Gentry (1981) identified a stage in the child’s writing development when the child experiments with writing letters without knowing what they

symbolize. Czerniewska discussed Clay's "flexibility principle" of learning to write when children experiment with "graphic symbols, creating new ones and decorating known ones." (1992, p. 58). Kress (1997) named the phenomenon a "drawing print" that occurs during the time when children have no motivation as yet to connect the writing-images with sounds and words. Art educators such as Lowenfeld and Brittain (1987) and Matthews (2003) also observed the writing-image stage. The boundary between image and text has been discussed in contexts other than children's drawings (Biggs, 2004). However, children's writing-images have not received attention in either art therapy or educational therapy. Drawing and educational processes are fused into one function at the time when young children integrate writing-images into their pictorial drawings before learning to read. This natural learning process is one of the reasons coursework is integrated into art therapy in AET.

### Educational Regression Through Writing-Images

Some children may miss the valuable learning process that accompanies the writing-image stage because of stress or trauma that occur in their lives at the time. Lyndon (2003) described a case study of a 9-year-old girl whose learning was arrested at a certain age due to trauma. The girl "had very little idea about numbers and appeared to have stopped learning at the level of a three year old; at the age at which she was traumatized." (p. 43).

Letters as drawn lines or letterforms are occasionally drawn in educational therapy, although they have not been studied in relation to the writing-image stage. Geddes (1999) and Clifford (1991) reviewed drawings that included drawn letters and words in some case studies, but they neither examined them in detail nor explained the potential value of educational regression to this early learning stage that precedes reading and more formal writing. A child may need to regress to whatever level is considered appropriate to enable mastery of the school subject: "By the use of material from an earlier phase of development ('educational regression'), a restoration of lost skills can be accomplished and inwardly digested" (Barrett & Trevitt, 1991, p. 145). I argue that the early spontaneous learning embedded in writing-images constitutes an important foundation for further coursework learning. It is possible that the writing-image stage is a prerequisite practice stage for moving further toward fluent reading and writing. When this foundation is disturbed due to stress or trauma, later coursework learning may be adversely affected.

I apply the concept of educational regression in AET by creating an opportunity for the child to return to educational activities from an earlier stage so as to ensure that he or she has a thorough understanding of basic learning before moving on to something more complicated. I argue that it is beneficial to provide a therapeutic context that creates opportunities for children with learning difficulties to regress educationally to the developmental stage of writing-images.

## Methods

### Selecting Case Study Children

Children who were selected for this study had learning difficulties and had experienced stress or trauma that appeared to have caused their learning difficulties. Selection involved three processes: (a) examination of school grades; (b) interviews with school personnel; and (c) criteria such as sufficient family support, adequate ego development, and no evidence of developmental disabilities, brain damage, or drugs or alcohol use. Five children were selected from a total of 34 pupils who were identified as having learning difficulties and who had experienced stress or trauma.

The children's parents were contacted by telephone by a school administrator, the child's teacher, or the school counselor, at which point the research was briefly introduced. Following the phone call, I sent a letter explaining the purposes of the study and contacted the parents by telephone to introduce myself and further explain the study. Each child's participation in the research was consented to via a consent form signed by a parent.

The investigation took place within a middle school in Iceland. Most children in Iceland attend middle schools regardless of whether they have emotional or learning difficulties, according to Icelandic government policy. Special education is offered in middle schools on an individual and group basis for children who have learning difficulties.

### Measures

Specific instruments and notes were included in the research design in order to evaluate the impact of the therapeutic method on the children's coursework learning and emotional well-being. These included:

1. The Wechsler III IQ test (Prifitera & Saklofske, 1998), in order to evaluate the progress in coursework learning.
2. The Child Behaviour Checklist (Achenback, 1991), completed by the child's parent and used to identify indicators of change in symptomatic behavior and feelings, which might indicate that certain emotional conflicts had been processed.
3. The Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder Rating Scale-IV (AD/HDRS-IV, Barkley, 1990), used by parents and teachers in order to rate whether a child's learning difficulty appeared to be due to neurological factors rather than emotional ones and whether there was any improvement in concentration or a decrease in hyperactivity following therapy.
4. Case notes that included analysis of changes in the children's behavior, artwork, verbal expression, and coursework learning.

### Research Paradigm

A qualitative research methodology was used to collect and analyze data derived from case notes on 5 children from

11 to 14 years of age who attended a total of 123 individual therapy sessions of 40 minutes each. The children were given pseudonyms and some details of the cases were altered in order to protect the children's identities. The data were collected and described in detail within the framework of a case study method (Yin, 2003). However, because AET is a complex construct that relies on a number of different constituent elements, I found that the data collected had many strands that needed to be more systematically categorized and conceptualized than anticipated when using the case study method. Therefore, I applied grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) in order to systematically analyze the data and build an initial theory of AET.

In accordance with grounded theory, I first read the case notes line by line and examined them with an open mind while undertaking open coding, which involved making notes regarding all emerging thoughts and ideas that were provoked by the data. Certain common features emerged when comparisons were made. Further analysis that I conducted resulted in labeling common features. Emerging codes were then systematically listed, questioned, compared, and classified. While reading the case notes repeatedly, I continued coding until certain categories eventually emerged. This process continued until no new information emerged from coding and the categories were saturated.

The second step in the analysis, according to grounded theory, is axial coding, in which I selected and modified the categories under investigation in relation to the codes that emerged from open coding and the research questions. At this stage connections were made between categories and subcategories. "Integration" was a core category that emerged through grounded theory (Ottarsdottir, 2009). "Writing-image" was also a category and concept that emerged from the grounded theory analysis. Selective coding was the third step in the analysis. At this stage the researcher moves from description to conceptualization in order to create an abstract initial theory that is grounded in the data. Throughout the data analysis, I wrote analytic memos regarding the coding, analysis, and formulation of the theory. The concepts represented a phenomenon and built a block of theory. Although grounded theory analysis takes place in certain steps, the process can be nonlinear as analysis may move back and forth between the phases.

Artwork that was created in the study was viewed as a mirror of each child's inner life, symbolizing aspects of his or her past, present, and future, as explained by Case and Dalley (1992). Also, in accordance with Schaverien's (1992, 1993) approach, such meanings that were embedded in the artwork were treated as indicators of symbolic meaning, process, and change while other possible interpretations and analyses were kept in mind. The artwork was observed and analyzed in combination with other data, such as behavior, verbal expression, and coursework learning.

In order to evaluate the impact of AET, I compared artworks (Schaverien, 1993) and results from the Wechsler III IQ test for children (Prifitera & Saklofske, 1998); the Child Behaviour Checklist (Achenbach 1991); and the Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder Rating Scale-IV (AD/HDRS-IV, Barkley, 1990) administered before and

after therapy. Results from the quantitative analysis are discussed following case material presented below.

## AET and Writing-Image Procedures

Art Education Therapy was applied in all 5 case studies. The focus of each case and session varied, depending on the child's individual needs. In some sessions the predominant approach was more like art therapy and in others it was more like educational therapy. At other times the focus was predominantly on an exploration of an educational concern; in many instances coursework was integrated into art therapy sessions through an AET approach to art making.

The children in the case studies were between the ages of 12 and 15 and were coping with difficulties in mastering a variety of school subjects as well as dealing with emotional difficulties. Sessions were held once or twice a week over several months for 40 minutes per session. I conducted both the therapy and the research. The data collected consisted of artwork, case notes, and coursework. Through the work with the children, a variety of exercises were designed to elicit the children's writing-images. In some cases the children spontaneously integrated text into an image. In other cases the image was made in relation to text. In still other cases an image was made in relation to mathematics.

Three aspects of the writing-image stage that were discovered by means of the study will be described: (a) writing text in relation to drawing an image or drawing an image in relation to a written text; (b) writing "math equations" without exact mathematical meaning; and (c) designing letters in a calligraphic way. I compare examples of these writing-images—letterforms and numerals made by children who had not learned to read but were just beginning to experiment with writing-images—with the images made by an older child in AET, as described below. Although the examples from young children were not a part of the research study, they are included here in order to show the parallels between children at the writing-image stage and older children who drew writing-images and thereby regressed educationally.

## Case Example: John

School coursework was integrated into art therapy through art making to the greatest extent in the case of John (pseudonym), who attended therapy for 8 months between the ages of 12 and 13 years. John's parents divorced when he was 18 months old. His mother had to work longer hours because the family had little money. Two years later John's maternal grandfather developed cancer. When John was 5 years old his maternal grandmother also developed cancer. She died when John was 6, and John's grandfather died when John was 9. While his grandparents were ill, John's mother had to take care of them. Consequently, she had neither sufficient energy nor time to focus on his care during that period. When his grandparents died John was sad but repressed his feelings and did not cry. When therapy began he still had a makeshift shrine in his room with images of his grandparents.

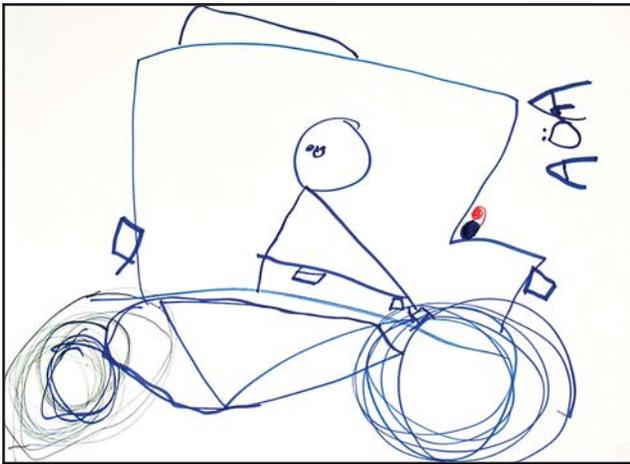


Figure 1

According to his mother, during John's first year, when his father still lived with him, the father and son enjoyed a good relationship. When his parents divorced John saw his father every other weekend. His father lived in Sweden at the time of therapy and John saw him at Christmas when he came to Iceland to visit. The summer before therapy, John went to Sweden to visit him. John missed his father.

John found it more difficult to start school than his mother had expected. She assumed, because he was curious and asked many questions, that he was intelligent and would do well in school. But reading was challenging for him. He could not organize his coursework, could not find the classroom, and lost much of his school material, as well as his house keys. The message that his mother received from the school was that John was not very intelligent. She was told not to replace the things John lost so that he would learn from the experience. In desperation, she tried sewing his mittens and keys to his clothes. John read slowly and sometimes he misunderstood words. His spelling was poor. He had difficulties expressing himself, both orally and in writing. He became frustrated because he could not understand or grasp what was happening in school. According to his mother, John was disorganized in his studies as well as in his personal habits and was generally absentminded.

The question was whether early emotions and conflicts surrounding John's parents' divorce, which occurred at the time when he was beginning to learn to talk, interfered with his reading and writing skills. It is possible that John did not receive enough stimulation and space to explore writing-images at an early age because he was occupied with other thoughts, such as: "Where is my father? Why is my mother always tired? What is happening to my grandparents?"

The image shown in Figure 1 was made by a 5-year-old child. The young child did not know the exact sound or meaning of the letters when drawing the image. It appears as if the letters and the pictorial image are one composition. Figure 2 shows an image made by John where he, like the younger child (Figure 1), integrated image and text. John spontaneously integrated image and text without any suggestion from me and with no specific relationship to his coursework. Although the image was not focused on

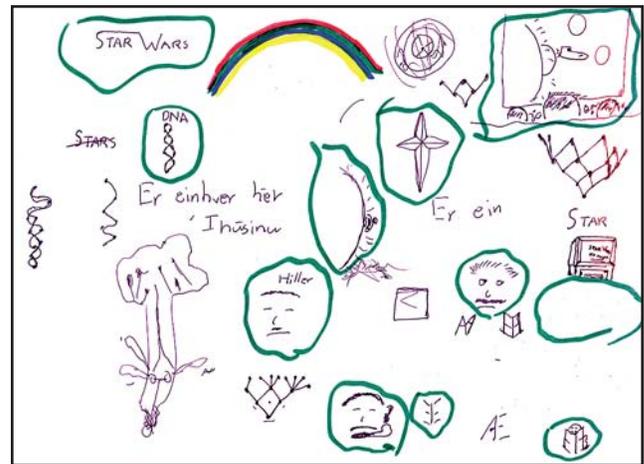


Figure 2



Figure 3

coursework, the text relates to reading and writing, which were at the core of John's learning difficulties.

When drawing, John demonstrated how he had drawn with his eyes closed at home while he was ill. First he wrote his name with his eyes closed (his name has been erased from Figure 2 for reasons of anonymity). Then he wrote, also with his eyes closed, *Er einhver hér í húsinu* (Is there someone in the house).

John continued drawing the same image, adding unrelated features. I noticed how fragmented and lacking in coherence the drawing was. Perhaps he was attempting to symbolize different parts of himself in an effort to create a coherent self, comprised of different emotional elements as represented in his drawing.

John spontaneously integrated letters and images in a somewhat disorganized way. A parallel can be observed between this work and the way in which some young children spontaneously integrate letterforms and images in their drawings (Figure 1). John's drawing indicated that he had regressed educationally. It is possible that he was spontaneously practicing coursework learning in a way that was similar to the actions of the writing-image stage, thereby strengthening his base of reading and writing.

John connected the image in Figure 3 with his course-work learning. He chose an incorrectly written word from a spelling dictation he had previously written in therapy and drew its meaning. The word John chose was *kræklingskæljum* (mussel shells). When he had finished drawing he pointed to each part and explained, "The first shell on the left is seen from above, the one beside is seen from the side, the two next shells are open shells and in the corner there are broken shells making sand."

Through this drawing John may have been expressing his different defense mechanisms or the shells may have symbolized his defenses. As the session was coming to an end, we discussed how, at the beginning of the development of written language, words were drawn images that later develop into letters. I pointed out how complicated a word made of letters can be compared to an image. He responded, as if he were thinking aloud, by saying, "Maybe everything is an image; even a letter is an image."

The image in Figure 4 was made by a 5-year-old boy who was on the verge of understanding the concept of a number. I had shown this child how to write a series of numbers in order. He then practiced drawing the numerals mixed with some letterforms. As seen in Figure 5, John spontaneously wrote numbers and letters that he claimed constituted a "physics equation" but were, in fact, fictitious. John drew spontaneously without a starting point in physics. The images in Figures 4 and 5 show that both of the boys who made them were working with numerals that did not entirely make sense to them, although they each had some understanding of the concept. The 5-year-old boy knew that numbers represent quantities, and John knew that equations represent phenomena in physics. Each of them played and experimented with arranging numerals without knowing their exact meaning. In this way John regressed educationally to the stage of playing with numerical forms without reference to their exact meaning.

John's decision to make Figure 5, including numbers in an incomprehensible physics equation, appears to be an educational regression to an earlier time when he may have been dealing with confusing emotions at the same time that he might have been learning about numbers through drawing writing-images. His writing-image (Figure 5) looks as though he were trying to understand and express something that was incomprehensible to him. The subject of the image may reference how difficult it was to understand why his father needed to be far away and, as a consequence, John rarely saw him.

In order to integrate the educational and emotional processes in AET, I asked John to choose an incorrectly spelled word from a text he had previously written in therapy and then to draw the forms of the letters using "calligraphic" letters. I suggested that he draw an image of the meaning of the word and, finally, that he write the spelling rule that fit the word. John played with letterforms (Figure 7) as a way to exclude the sound and meaning of the letters and the word. The focus of this activity was on the form of the letters and resulted in a writing-image that is similar to the spontaneously drawn letterforms with a dot pattern in Figure 6, created by a 4-year-old girl. This younger child

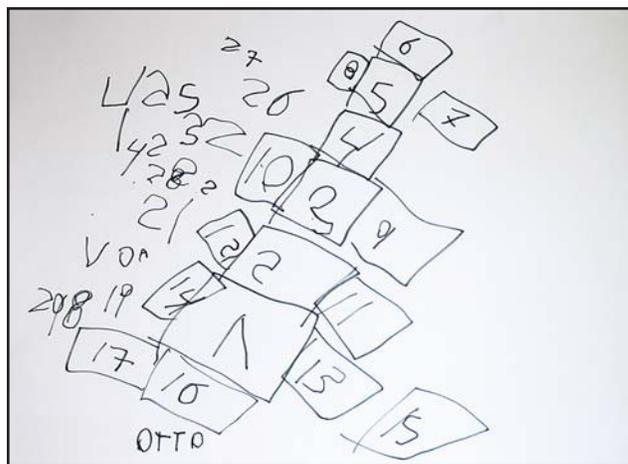


Figure 4

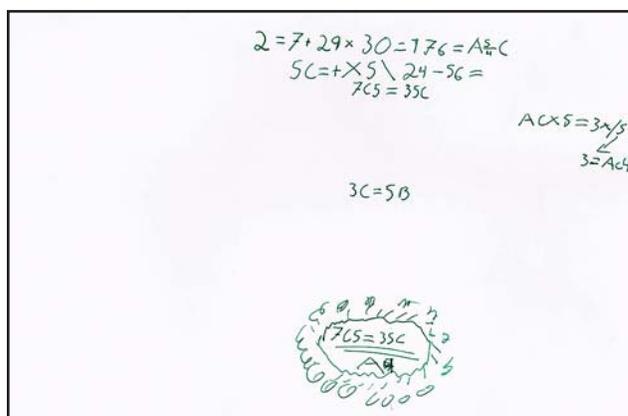


Figure 5

had limited knowledge of the sound and meaning of the letterforms. John worked with the word *stangir* (bars), which he had earlier spelled incorrectly. As he was drawing Figure 7, he explained the image in the lower right corner of the page. The men who were on top of the letters were keeping the letters from falling. At the end, while he drew the word in the upper right corner and placed grids over it, he said, "I've got an idea. This is like a prison. I put the letters in prison because they are incorrect."

It seemed as though there was something that John needed to exclude or split away by means of imprisonment. The term "splitting" is applied to the mechanism whereby emotions and parts of the self are split off, repressed, and/or denied. Splitting can serve the purpose of defense (Moore & Fine, 1990). I realized that the word in the lower right corner of John's drawing was incorrectly spelled. I considered the possibility that John needed his misspelling in order to act out his feelings. The term "acting out" refers to a behavioral expression that is reproduced in action rather than remembered and verbalized. When acting out, a child may repeat an act without becoming aware of its meaning (Moore & Fine, 1990). Misspelling may be in some cases a way of expressing emotions through action rather than verbalizing or working with them through art making. In educational therapy, the emotional blocks that impair learning are interpreted with psychological insight (e.g., Beaumont,



Figure 6



Figure 7

1991). Interpretation in AET is made in accordance with educational therapy by considering the link between learning difficulties and underlying emotional material.

If spelling incorrectly were a way of acting out feelings, John would have needed to continue to misspell in order not to fall apart emotionally. However, this was not productive; his only achievement would have been making his written communication unclear. To improve his spelling, he needed to find an alternative way of expressing and integrating his split-off, denied, or repressed emotions and parts of the self. Through symbolic expression in his artwork within the therapeutic relationship, John had an opportunity to integrate and transfer his emotions from spelling to the true source of his feelings, which in this case could stem partly from being unable to see his father more often. Through the interplay between text, numbers, and image (Figures 2, 3, 5, & 7), John appeared to have regressed educationally to a time when he was beginning to learn about numbers and letters. Similarly, the young children who drew the images in Figures 1, 4, and 6 were experimenting with writing-images in order to build the groundwork for further coursework learning.

### Evaluating the Impact of AET

The impact of AET was evaluated through an analysis of artwork completed by the participating children at dif-

**Table 1**  
Children's Ages, Number of Sessions, and Psychological Test Results

	John	Stina	Oli	Bjössi	Lisa
Age (years)	12	14	14	13	10
Number of sessions	32	18	16	16	41
IQ BT	97	—	—	85	92
IQ AT	113			89	99
CBC <i>t</i> -score					
SC BT	59	—	75	75	78
SC AT	59		59	63	64
SP BT	66	—	59	55	66
SP AT	50		63	59	52
AD/HDRS-IV					
m BT	42		63	81	73
m AT	34	—	58	79	48
t BT	40		61	85	—
t AT	32		95	80	48

Note: Overall IQ score (IQ). Before Therapy (BT), After Therapy (AT). Child Behaviour Checklist (CBC). Somatic Complaints (SC), Social Problems (SP). AD/HDRS-IV percentile (AD/HDRS-IV). mother (m), teacher (t).

ferent stages of therapy. I also compared the psychological testing data from before and after therapy. Because the study involved only a few children, it was not possible to generate statistically significant results; therefore, the findings were only analyzed descriptively. Test results are not available for all children because some of them chose not to complete the tests.

The therapeutic analysis of John's and the other four children's images suggested that AET helped them manage to work through and integrate some of their emotions. As shown in Table 1, John's overall IQ scores (according to the Wechsler III IQ test for children, Prifitera & Saklofske, 1998) improved by 16 points during the course of the therapy. According to Murphy and Davidshofer (2005), the standard error of measurement for IQ scores is 10 points; John's 16-point increase therefore indicates significant progress. Macintosh (1998) claimed that IQ test scores can predict coursework learning at school. If so, then John's increase in IQ scores indicates that AET has the potential to facilitate coursework learning. According to John's mother, his teacher, and the case record, he made progress in his spelling and reading through therapy.

The Child Behaviour Checklist (Achenback, 1991) was completed by the children's parents before and after therapy. An analysis of the results showed that all of the

children observed for the study improved in some areas after therapy (Table 1). The indicator of clinical difficulty is set at a *t*-score of 70. Some of the children scored higher than 70 before therapy, which meant that they were within the clinical range.

Three out of the four children studied had somatic complaints within the clinical range before therapy (Table 1). In the case of these children, the somatic complaints diminished, suggesting that AET did indeed have potential to enhance their emotional well-being.

There seemed to be some correspondence between the duration of therapy and the degree to which social skills improved. John and Lisa (pseudonyms), who received more prolonged therapy than Oli and Bjösssi (pseudonyms), had fewer social problems afterward, whereas Oli's and Bjösssi's social problems were slightly worse than before. It may be that longer time is needed to disclose conflict and to integrate emotions within a therapeutic relationship in order to gain some ability for building relationships outside the therapeutic environment. The change in symptoms as recorded on the Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder Rating Scale-IV (AD/HDRS-IV, Barkley, 1990) also appears to be related to the duration of the therapy. Those children who received the most prolonged therapy showed the most significant decreases in symptoms, whereas those who received less therapy showed less of a decrease in symptoms and in some instances symptoms increased.

Findings from several strands of data indicated that integrating coursework into art therapy can be an effective therapeutic method for children with learning difficulties who have experienced stress or trauma. The findings indicated that AET has the potential to enhance emotional well-being and to facilitate coursework learning in the population treated.

## Conclusion

At the writing-image stage, a child naturally and spontaneously integrates the two functions of image drawing and coursework learning. The fact that children spontaneously integrate a pictorial medium with letterforms early in their educational development is part of the rationale for integrating coursework into art therapy in AET. AET provides a method for children to regress educationally to the time of the writing-image stage as a way to reclaim the ground for further learning.

If something has gone wrong at this stage due to stress or trauma, a therapeutic intervention such as AET can play an important role in working with that early learning experience through writing-images. In AET the child is given an opportunity to regress educationally to an earlier stage within the safety of the therapeutic relationship.

The outcome of this research is an initial theory that the stimulation of drawing writing-images provides an opportunity to reclaim a basic skill, thereby strengthening the groundwork for coursework learning. Opportunities for educational regression to the writing-image stage were provided in AET. Art educational therapy has the potential to enhance emotional well-being and to facilitate course-

work learning in children who have learning difficulties and have experienced stress or trauma.

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## CALL FOR PAPERS & RESEARCH

### Art Therapy's Ethical Challenges in a Complex World

*Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association* is seeking submissions for a special issue on ethics and professionalism. As art therapists interact with increasingly diverse perspectives and expectations of clients, other professionals, and professional groups and systems, ethical challenges are becoming more complex. The Journal invites submissions that address ethical issues in art therapy research, treatment, theory and practice, and education. Papers, reflections, and original research studies that present models of ethical decision-making applied to the unique practice realities of art therapy and other related professional issues are encouraged.

**The deadline for submission is September 15, 2010.**

Please refer to the "Guidelines for Submission" published in *Art Therapy* or online at [www.arttherapyjournal.org](http://www.arttherapyjournal.org) for specific requirements of style and format. Send submissions electronically to the *Art Therapy* Editorial Office by following author instructions on the website.

## Viewpoints Welcomed!

Viewpoints are short articles that present professional experiences, reflections, art works, or informed response to issues having implications for the field. A brief abstract also is now required. Submission may not exceed 2500 words including references. To have your viewpoint considered for peer review and publication, please submit online at [www.arttherapyjournal.org](http://www.arttherapyjournal.org) following the instructions on the author tab of the website.