

Meeting the Needs of Urban Students: Creative Arts Therapy in Jersey City Public Schools

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Abstract

This paper describes the history and development of the Jersey City Public Schools creative arts therapy program. Creative arts therapists contributed examples of their work throughout the district that provide a window into their respective school settings. Examples include technology-based art therapy, an extended school year program, collaborations with school-based mental health workers, professional development, music therapy integrated with academics, community arts events, short term behavioral programs, and internship opportunities. The challenges of establishing and sustaining a creative arts therapy program in a large urban school district are addressed. The article affirms that creative arts therapists develop effective school programs through innovation, research, and collaborative efforts among peers and other professionals.

Introduction

Developing a creative arts therapy program in a large urban school district is by no means an easy task. Initially, it takes the dedication of an individual who knows the needs of children living in an urban district and has insight into the educational benefits of the creative process to ameliorate those needs. It also takes the energy, administrative savvy, and perseverance of many people to cultivate and sustain the program. Poverty, broken families, racial and ethnic tensions and distrust, hunger, substance abuse, violence, and gangs often are all part of the daily reality that a child brings into the classroom. The National Research Council Institute of Medicine has studied how these societal issues affect children developmentally, drawing from stress theory, social theory, and social epidemic theories. It found, for example, that children who live in a dangerous neighborhood may have fewer interactions with peers and other adults due to the

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restrictions placed on them by their parents (Shankoff & Phillips, 2000). In this climate, it is imperative that a "cooperative culture" (Gratton, 2009) is nurtured among parents, teachers, and administrators to support students. A creative arts therapy program is one avenue of support that can help schools address the effects of these societal issues on children.

History of the Creative Arts Therapy Program

In 1993 Nancy Healy, District Supervisor for the Jersey City Public Schools' Visual and Performing Arts Department, took the initiative to begin such a journey. The impetus for her vision to incorporate creative arts therapy into the school district came from the realization that more was needed to address the unique challenges of students with special needs. Advocacy for the program came from members of the Department of Special Education who, through their own research, saw the value of creative arts therapy to augment the services they were already providing.

Jersey City Public Schools (JCPS) is comprised of 27 elementary, 5 middle, and 6 high schools serving over 27,000 students. According to data collected by the JCPS Office of Business Technology, the majority of students are socioeconomically challenged and approximately 13% are identified as needing special education services (D. Gupta, personal communication, March 23, 2010). Eight percent of the district's students receive bilingual and English as Second Language instruction; the fact that there are 104 languages spoken among the students and their families is an inherent obstacle to academic success. Within the district's pre-K through grade 12 populations, 38% of the students are Hispanic, 34% are African American, 11% are Caucasian, and the remaining 17% represent a broad range of ethnicities and cultures including Asian American, Haitian, Native American, and Egyptian (D. Gupta, personal communication, March 23, 2010). The district's children face myriad challenges, especially if they have not been given the essential tools to grow due to a lack of erudition or familial constancy, which interrupts the development of a healthy child (Jones, 2006; Kaplan, 1978; Shankoff & Phillips, 2000). District-wide problems compound the potential for these children to become youth at risk for school failure.

To launch the creative arts therapy program, Healy approached Ali Karamanol, a dedicated art educator and

child advocate in the district at the time, to see if she would be willing to help develop the program as its first art therapist. Karamanol began studying art therapy and held great enthusiasm for the benefits it would bring to her students. Through constant lobbying, Healy won approval to expand the services. Grant monies allowed further growth; as principals and administrators learned more about creative arts therapy and observed its effectiveness firsthand, they prevailed upon the district to continue the expansion by hiring therapists. Advocacy from professional organizations such as the Art Educators of New Jersey brought to light the development of the JCPS creative arts therapy program at their annual conferences. In turn this generated interest in other school districts to pilot similar programs with their own students.

Fifteen years later, the JCPS creative arts therapy program has 10 art therapists and 5 music therapists who serve general education and special education students in 16 schools. From its simple beginnings, a solid foundation and dissemination throughout the district has enabled the program to flourish. These factors, along with weekly team meetings for collegial support, have allowed the program to address a broad range of social, emotional, and psychological issues within this large urban district. To create an understanding of the current creative arts therapy program in JCPS, described below, members of the creative arts therapy team were invited to contribute examples that provided a window into their unique work in the JCPS schools.

Change and Opportunity: Technology-Based Art Therapy

When the creative arts therapy program began, art therapists worked primarily with special education students who were placed in self-contained classrooms. Over the past 8 years JCPS has made many changes within the Department of Special Education, moving from self-contained to inclusive classrooms in an attempt to mainstream children into general education. Each inclusive classroom has one certified elementary teacher and one special educator. The total number of students in each classroom averages between 20 and 28, with no more than 8 special education students. Both teachers work together with all students.

Change may cause apprehension and JCPS was not immune to some anxiety and resistance on the part of staff and students. However, change became an opportunity for art therapist Kristen Marino to utilize her training to help elementary and middle school teachers and students make the transition. Marino provides art therapy with small groups, individuals, and classroom-wide art therapy, and offers therapeutic workshops for the teachers. Program goals include improving self-esteem and confidence, understanding and dealing with emotions, developing positive coping and social skills, building character, and accepting differences.

Among the new and innovative programs that JCPS provides to all students, middle school students select

electives in their areas of particular interest. Marino contracted with the Animation Project, founded by art therapist Brian Austin, to provide technology-based art therapy for students at a JCPS middle school. The Animation Project incorporates educational and therapeutic strategies to teach students computer animation skills using Autodesk 3ds Max. The goal is for these newly learned skills to become educational or career interests when the youth reach high school and beyond. The principal of the school affirmed the program, stating:

I am proud to say that the administration, staff, and students have high praises for the animation program. From the very beginning the students were excited and motivated to learn. The staff worked with a wide range of students varying in ability levels, as well as various social and emotional levels. The students thrived in the program. There was a marked improvement in student attendance and overall performance. The culminating activity was a screening of all of the students' individual projects. They were recognized by their teachers and peers with rave reviews. It was a huge success. We look forward to a continued collaboration and even greater successes.

Special Needs: Extended School Year Program

In 2008 art therapist Tina Boscarino was hired to work with children with autism in the JCPS Extended School Year Program. This program is offered to pre-K through high school students who are eligible for special education services. Therapeutic art lessons using puppetry, movement, and song are used to enable the children to work on multiple developmental issues as well as self-expression. For one lesson, children read *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Carle, 1969) and made butterfly sticks and finger puppets in response (Figure 1). The older children used modeling material for their puppets. Boscarino provided a puppet theater and arranged for a group of older students to perform improvisational plays for the transitional kindergarten classes, which are aimed at strengthening the students' readiness for school. The special education supervisors overseeing the Extended School Year Program realized the benefits of art therapy for the children and hired two art therapists for the following summer.

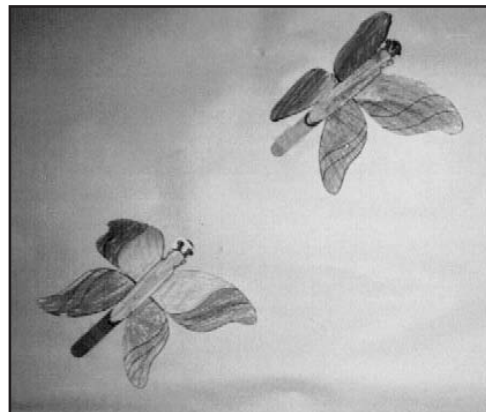


Figure 1

Collaboration and Professional Flexibility

An elementary guidance counselor referred several children to a school's creative arts therapy team for bereavement counseling during the 2008–09 school year. Music therapist Salomi Massaras and art therapist Cindy Hamilton, along with a licensed clinical social worker, collaborated to address these students' needs. The clinicians provided the school administrator with a proposal that included a consent form to participate, a student survey, a plan for how each modality would be utilized for the duration of 8 weeks of sessions, and information for the parents of the participating children.

Six students met for 45 minutes once a week. To begin, Massaras introduced each group member, discussed expectations for the group, and asked students to sign a statement that addressed the need for confidentiality. For each session Massaras played music that related to the loss of a loved one and helped the students create music about their own individual losses, which they performed for one another. Afterward the social worker on the team helped the children talk about what they were experiencing, using feeling words and dramatic play as additional tools for expression. Hamilton distributed magazine images and a variety of papers to the children that they could use to create artworks to describe their loved ones with images and words. All the students were given the opportunity to share their work and participate in the discussion. For the final group project, the children created a memory box dedicated to their lost family members. Hamilton noted that among these children, loss often is not talked about or processed and therefore may lead to further problems in school. The children were able to express themselves in a safe, nonjudgmental environment facilitated by the professional considerations and collaborative efforts of the creative arts therapy team.

Integration of Academics and Therapy

The combination of therapy with didactic support can help children in need of special education achieve by strengthening academic and emotional goals. Among the middle school students with whom music therapist Mechelle Chestnut works is Jesse (pseudonym), a seventh grader who was placed in a self-contained special education transition class. Jesse was reading at the second-grade level, his short-term memory was undependable, and he was classified as cognitively impaired. Although he had many friends and acquaintances in school, Jesse also had emotional outbursts and low self-esteem. In music therapy they improvised: Jesse on drums and Chestnut on keyboard. Playing with a simple yet defined rhythmic structure, Jesse relied on Chestnut for direction: when to begin the song, when to take a solo, and when to end. Occasionally he led the improvisation in dynamics (the degree of sound intensity) and quieted down or made eye contact to signal Chestnut when he wanted her to take the lead. When they recorded music, the process of listening

back stimulated an unusual degree of reflection in him. Jesse enjoyed hearing the good parts and was embarrassed about the bad, but above all he was surprised to hear himself.

In addition to music they worked on alphabet sounds, reading, and spelling. They developed a routine: when Jesse encountered a word he did not know or could not read, he spelled and sounded it out with Chestnut. He wrote the word on a note card that he also signed and dated to take ownership of his achievement. Together they reviewed all the note cards and, with encouragement, he shared the new words with his teachers. Whenever he spelled a word correctly, he smiled and became more animated. Chestnut and Jesse alternated all year between playing music and reading, with a few emotional crisis sessions in the mix. At the end of the year they reflected on this process and his achievements. Jesse, who typically walked coolly in the hallways despite having been in numerous fights, now sobbed. When asked why, he responded, "because I worked so hard and my mom is proud of me."

In Jesse's case, the flexibility of his therapist's approach in combining music therapy with didactic support helped him find what he needed in order to achieve; his articulation of his achievement confirmed his positive self-affirmation. The therapist's insight and holistic understanding were essential for the success of creative arts therapy in this academic setting.

Community Art Expression

The first annual community art project for one of JCPS elementary schools took place in February 2007. The event was intended to facilitate community expression, to strengthen resolve as a community, and to give support and hope through creativity. It also was an opportunity to creatively engage the parents and to inform them of the



Figure 2

creative arts therapy program. Organized as a “back to school night,” the event was a constructive and enlightening experience for the staff, parents, and neighborhood community.

Prior to the event, art therapist Brian Tepper cast a variety of plaster masks that were reflective of different cultures. Tables were set up with the cast faces and painting materials for the attendees to use. The number of parents, children, and staff who participated in this creative expression and who stated that they had enjoyed themselves confirmed the event’s success. Although each mask was a unique, individual creation, when assembled into one installation a visible sense of community emerged (Figure 2). Tepper found that people from diverse backgrounds came together in a positive way to collectively understand and secure a more promising future for their children.

Building Staff Cohesion

In an effort to provide professional development in one JCPS school, art therapist Angela Tardiff was asked to implement a creative arts therapy workshop for the staff. The principal initially saw the workshop as an opportunity to enhance the classroom teachers’ repertoire of effective activities. Tardiff’s intent was to address a number of the staff’s needs simultaneously, which included relaxation, staff cohesion, morale, and professional identity. Upon discussing the plan with the principal, Tardiff was given the freedom to facilitate and structure the session with open parameters. This was a welcomed opportunity for her to utilize her expertise without imposed, counterproductive expectations, as well as to educate the teachers about art therapy.

The teachers rotated through three 90-minute sessions. Attendees viewed a public access television segment of *Classroom Close-up, NJ*, produced by the New Jersey Education Association, that documented an actual art therapy session conducted at a JCPS school and a follow-up interview by Ali Karamanol. Tardiff then gave a presentation on school art therapy and offered a hands-on activity called “Coil Pots with Self Symbols.” After viewing teacher- and student-made samples, the attendees drew graphic symbols of one of the following: (a) something that they enjoy doing or take pride in; (b) a place that makes them feel relaxed, safe, happy, and comfortable; or (c) someone who makes them feel loved, cared for, accepted, valued, and special.

The participants created the symbols with modeling material and attached these to the outer surface of the pots. Many moved beyond their initial resistance and uncertainty to find that they enjoyed the art experience. Several teachers were proud of their final pieces and expressed feelings of surprise that their efforts turned out so well. The workshop engendered staff cohesion, which was demonstrated by the attendees working together, providing positive feedback, and sharing laughter, ideas and supplies, and technical support to one another. Some teachers did not want to leave at the end and were bothered that they hadn’t finished their pots. Others openly discussed the

personal relevance of their chosen symbols, as typically occurs in the process of art therapy. During the question and answer session that concluded the workshop, the feedback indicated that the staff had acquired a better understanding of what art therapy is and its benefit to students in their classrooms. Written feedback on the workshop assessment form was very positive and many attendees asked for future art therapy workshops.

Community Music

Two fourth-grade classes in a JCPS school participated in a program called Community Music during the 2008–09 school year, facilitated by Erika Munzing, the school’s music therapist. The program was conducted as a classroom-wide therapeutic music experience that engaged all of the students in a cooperative group experience. The group size for both classes was 16 students; one was a traditional general education classroom and the other was an inclusive classroom for special education students. Community Music had several goals including improving social skills, building relationships among students, increasing self-esteem, and creating a sense of community in the classroom. Group expectations were that students would participate fully, collaborate with peers, and develop respect for themselves and others. Munzing presented the group with various musical and nonmusical experiences including games, drumming, relaxation exercises, musical instruction, formation of a music ensemble, and performance in a school concert.

Both classes began the program with disorganization, poor social interactions, emotional outbursts, and inappropriate behaviors; therefore, Munzing focused on team building and creating healthy boundaries for everyone in the classroom. Music therapy interventions were comprised of musical games that required group members to work together, drum circles that encouraged free expression, and group discussions about teamwork and feelings. As the group experience progressed, the students made improvements in interpersonal skills and there were fewer incidents of problem behaviors. From these beginning stages, the group process led to creating a musical ensemble in the form of a hand bell choir that accompanied other classes for the school’s holiday concert. These performances were given high praise by teachers and administrators, and the students commented that they wanted to continue performing as a group in the future. Both classes came together in a new ensemble that performed in a concert at the end of the school year.

Grants: Connecting Curriculum, Cultures, and the Arts

In 2006 the JCPS Visual and Performing Arts Department partnered with the Newark Museum to submit and receive a grant entitled Arts Catalyst from the U.S. Department of Education’s Professional Development for the Arts Educators Program. The grant provided in-depth professional development for art

teachers, creative arts therapists, and language arts teachers working with students in grades 6–8, using the resources of the Newark Museum. The theme of the 3-year grant program was “dress, shelter, and cultural celebrations” across the Americas, Asia, and Africa. Creative arts therapists participated by guiding participants to explore social skills, multicultural issues, and empathic knowledge of other cultures. Arts Catalyst successfully served more than 6,000 students and 136 teachers, creative arts therapists, and language arts specialists with shared, collaborative learning experiences. The final outcome of the project was a collection of CDs with lesson plans developed by the participating teachers and therapists, enhanced with images of art and cultural objects from the Newark Museum.

Behavior for Better Choices

Jersey City Public Schools provides two programs for children who have difficulty functioning within the rules of the district’s student code of conduct and academic expectations. The students referred to the program often act out to relieve the pain of many failures and feelings of worthlessness. A creative arts therapist works with the students to help them consider their negative behaviors and improve on them.

The Better Choices program is an intervention for nonviolent general education students who have a history of difficulty in choosing appropriate problem-solving behaviors and so find themselves in violation of the student code of conduct. These students may be disruptive and create distractions in the classroom on a frequent basis. The Better Choices program teaches a combination of academics and behavior modification techniques to help students expand their repertoires of good decision making.

Zero Tolerance is a program that provides a safe place for both general and special education students who have been suspended from their home school due to engaging in acts of violence, bringing a weapon to school, or committing vandalism. These students frequently need much support and education to develop coping skills for dealing with oppositional or defiant behaviors or conduct disorders. Students are referred for up to 10 days depending on the severity of the infraction.

The art therapy interventions in this setting usually are brief and solution focused, addressing the “here and now” challenges of the students’ lives. Riley (1999) observed that adolescents often find therapy to be an imposition or “form of torture inflicted by grown-ups” (p. 237). Many students are well defended, street smart, and not tolerant of inauthentic attempts by adults to “pry” into their belief systems and issues. According to Riley, listening and creatively responding to the student’s reality can lead to a successful intervention; “uncertainty and flexibility are positive traits for the ‘adolescent’ therapist” (p. 18). Another effective approach is reality therapy, which helps students self-evaluate their actions to determine whether their actions are working for them (Prout & Brown, 2007).

In both programs the art therapist works closely with a social worker, teachers, and administrators; schedules appointments; and frequently deals with crisis interventions. Flexibility is needed to address inconsistent attendance that results from internal as well as external pressures that affect the students’ daily psychological thermostats. The art therapy room offers space and materials to explore their own conflicts, and to work with a therapist whose most effective role usually is to listen and to inquire nonjudgmentally as a “curious observer.” The chaos typically found in this milieu and the fear that it may provoke can be wearing on the therapist’s sense of balance, but the rewards gained with students who respond favorably to therapeutic intervention reaffirms the essential component of hope needed to continue providing support.

Interns Experiencing Diversity

Jersey City Public Schools provides diverse learning experiences for creative arts therapy interns in particular settings within the school district. Diane Quiroga from Caldwell College in New Jersey and Lara Kahan from the School of Visual Arts in New York were two recent interns who experienced a structured school schedule, opportunity to lead classes in therapeutic art approaches, and team collaboration with general and special education students in both an educator and art therapist role. The long-term setting allows the intern to build a therapeutic relationship with the children for an entire school year and to witness student progress over time.

Both interns agreed that although they had completely different experiences in their respective settings, they both gained knowledge and hands-on experience, providing them with confidence as they continue in the field. Opportunities to work with diverse multicultural issues, children with special needs, and technologically advanced tools give interns specific advantages in the art therapy field.

Collegial Support

One of the benefits of the JCPS creative arts therapy program is the weekly team meeting. Each creative arts therapist contributes to professional development requirements by presenting on a topic during the year. This allows the team to share techniques and cases, and to dialogue on pertinent practice issues. The approach each creative arts therapist takes is as unique as the character of his or her school. Lively discussions brought on by administrative differences and preferences within each location provide team members with insight for dealing with future challenges.

These collegial gatherings also allow time for dialogue on areas that continue to challenge school arts therapy such as the integration of the creative arts therapy program with the New Jersey State Board of Education’s Intervention and Referral Services program, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and the needs of students with Individual Education Programs. The benefit of having the team be

present to each other as they listen, resolve, witness, and support fellow team members is valuable for individual and team growth.

Challenges Facing the Program

One challenge for a large district like JCPS is not being financially able to provide creative arts therapy services to special education students who do not have a creative arts therapist in their building. As Robbins (1994) observed, art therapy “cannot be divorced from the economic problems that beset healthcare institutions. Each department has a vested interest in obtaining a share of limited space and funds” (p. 214). The balance and weight of building and sustaining the creative arts therapy program is significant. In New Jersey’s current atmosphere of severe cuts to education challenges arise when students who are classified or who qualify for special education services are transferred from one school to another or transfer out of the district. If a student’s Individual Education Program includes creative arts therapy services as supplementary or related services the school is required to provide such services. This creates a challenge for the creative arts therapy program in a school district of 38 schools and 15 creative arts therapists. Although therapists may support the importance of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act to provide for students with special needs, at the same time they must take care in how they label their services (for example, using such terms as “related,” “supplemental,” or “adjunctive”) in the face of severely restrictive budgets (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2009).

Another indisputable challenge is the importance and need for quantifiable evidence to demonstrate the effectiveness of creative arts therapy in the educational setting. Although there is considerable praise and verbal accounts that affirm the JCPS program’s success, there are no outcome studies to support these observations. The lack of research is partially due to time restraints; for instance, during the first 6 years of the program, one therapist was utilized to serve as many students as possible in a valiant, “triage” attempt to bandage the students’ many emotional, social, and psychological wounds. By the end of the 1998 school year, the district had its first registered art therapist and the program received statewide recognition. Within JCPS, constructive evaluative research is underway. At this juncture, the strongest evidence of the efficacy of creative arts therapy resides in the district’s commitment to retain the program at a time of deep and severe budget cuts when each and every vacated position is being evaluated for continuation. Dr. Charles T. Epps, Jr., Superintendent of JCPS and long time supporter of the arts, commented that he was “proud that the Jersey City Public Schools has taken a leadership role in advancing the creative arts therapies” and also stated:

The positive impact the arts have on the lives of the students of the Jersey City Public Schools has long been visible. The value of the creative arts therapies is in utilizing a modality with which most children feel both comfortable and

invigorated to explore behaviors that might obstruct their reaching full academic and emotional potential. It is vital in the educational environment that we address the whole child. (personal communication, July 27, 2009)

Informal research can provide valuable insight for establishing a new program or provide a foundation for developing goals. Over the past 2 years the creative arts therapy team has discussed how to most effectively collect data in such a dynamic, complex environment. Community, home, peers, teachers, school counselors, social workers, crisis intervention specialists, and administrators may all contribute to the day-to-day outcomes of a student. During the past year, JCPS creative art therapists have initiated the collection of quantifiable evidence to support the effectiveness of the creative arts therapy program in the schools.

A further challenge in JCPS is the requirement that creative art therapists hired by the district must become certified teachers within their disciplines. The New Jersey Department of Education (2006) offers an alternative route to certification that is designed for individuals who have not completed a formal teacher preparation program but wish to obtain the necessary training to become a certified teacher. The program assists in the creative arts therapist’s transition from a clinical setting into the educational setting. Professional learning challenges may include finding appropriate spaces within a school building for art therapy, understanding the roles of behavioral and nonbehavioral professionals, dealing with administrative mandates and academic priorities, and overcoming the stigma of the word “therapy”—all of which challenge the best of therapists and present roadblocks for their students.

Conclusion

Art therapists’ embrace of the ideal that “we define ourselves by our own potentials and limitations” (Robbins, 2004) helps to keep us focused. There is often a delicate balance that a therapist must strike to fill the requests and requirements of the school administrator while still providing the student with optimal therapeutic services. These may very well be the same challenges that a graduate creative arts therapy degree program must address, given that it can only simulate real life experiences in the field. In reflecting on these similarities with creative arts therapy in the school setting, Nancy Healy commented:

We do not always have the answers; however, we are and will continue to be a program shaped and molded by the students we serve like clay waiting to respond to the needs presented, always fluid, always flexible, hospitable, welcoming, and safe. (personal communication, April 2, 2009)

Our goal as professionals in a school setting is to find ways to support the children we work with each day. In Jersey City Public Schools, the creative arts therapy team continues to work toward new and better ways to resolve challenges, seek evidence of successful outcomes, improve collegial relationships, and redefine our roles as creative arts therapists in the school.

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C A L L F O R P A P E R S & R E S E A R C H

Special Issue on the Social Activism and Advocacy Paradigm in Art Therapy

As social justice issues are becoming more pronounced in a pluralistic, globalized world, *Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association* is seeking submissions for a special issue that will examine the on-going evolution of the social activist and advocacy paradigm in the research and practice of art therapy. Where and how is advocacy practiced? What are the essential competencies required of the art therapist change agent? What are the special benefits involved and the challenges that advocates and their co-participants face? How do art therapists manage conflicting goals, expectations, cultural values, and standards of care? Original research that explores these and other questions are invited, as well as practice-oriented papers and viewpoints that contribute to art therapists' professional development.

The deadline for submission is July 15, 2010.

Please refer to the "Guidelines for Submission" published in *Art Therapy* or online at 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.