

**ERD 2020****Education, Reflection, Development, Eighth Edition****THE IMPORTANCE OF ART THERAPY IN PRESCHOOLERS  
PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT**

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**Abstract**

Pre-school age is the period of outlining the first elements of self-awareness and socialisation. Beyond the limited space of his own house and family, the pre-school child becomes aware of the existence of a different world and wants to get involved in the process of knowing and transforming it; thus the pre-school child discovers himself as a person with numerous abilities. Art therapy is a clinical method aimed at people in need of psychotherapeutic assistance in the context of dealing with self or environment-related psychological issues; it cannot replace psychotherapy or medication and focuses on the use of various artistic methods such as music (melotherapy), theatre (drama therapy) or plastic arts (visual-plastic art therapy). Creative therapy offers preschoolers the opportunity to express their emotions and feelings difficult or impossible to verbalize, because songs, musical instruments, dance, colors, plasticine are naturally accessible, and the novelty of such concrete activities is pleasant, surprising and also stimulating. The aim of this research was to investigate the efficiency of a educational intervention program based on art therapy regarding the development of the following skills of preschoolers: creativity, emotional expressivity, fine motor skills, focused attention, self-esteem, patience and self-confidence. Calculating the effect size for the seven pairs, we obtained a  $d = 2.37$ , which means that the proposed intervention program had a strong effect on the abilities investigated among the participants in the study.

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## 1. Introduction

Pre-school age is a period of discoveries. Beyond the limited space of their homes and families, pre-schoolers learn that there is a different world out there, which is why they want to get involved in getting to know and change it, thus discovering themselves as people with certain skills. This period is the one in which they become self-aware and they start socializing. Whenever pre-schoolers talk with older people, relatives or other grown-ups, they discover themselves, get to know their own skills and limits, but they also develop a social behaviour and individual characteristics. During this very period, there come the skills acquired by their involvement in exploring, explaining, processing and acting upon the reality (Glava & Glava, 2002, pp. 9-10).

The definition offered by The American Art Therapy Association's (2017) art therapy is the following: Art Therapy is an integrative mental health and human services profession that enriches the lives of individuals, families, and communities through active art-making, creative process, applied psychological theory, and human experience within a psychotherapeutic relationship. Art Therapy is used to improve cognitive and sensory-motor functions, foster self-esteem and self-awareness, cultivate emotional resilience, promote insight, enhance social skills, reduce and resolve conflicts and distress, and advance societal and ecological change.

Browsing through the specialized literature, among the benefits of art-therapy regarding pre-schoolers, there are also: the sensory exploration ("art-therapy predominantly focuses on visual and somatic-sensory information, which shows the way in which images and expressions reflect the emotional expressiveness which, in its turn, affects the thoughts and the behaviour of pre-schoolers", Lusebrink, 2004, p. 129); the development of some pro-social types of behaviour (such as: giving help, sharing, care and empathy, (Eisenberg et al., 2006); school readiness (the development of literacy, Anvari et al., 2002); self-regulation of behaviour (Nicolopoulou et al., 2009; Winsler et al., 2011); self-regulation of feelings (Brown, 2020); stress decrease (Brown, 2020; Lobo & Winsler, 2006; Shoemark & Arnup, 2014), social skill development (Cirelli et al., 2014), development of general communication strategies (Mualem & Klein, 2013) and development of scientific skills (Brown et al., 2010).

## 2. Problem Statement

The period of early childhood (since birth until 8 years of age) is known to be a critical period in which children develop certain cognitive and social-emotional skills, which later are to be associated with the success acquired throughout their lifetime (Menzer, 2015). During early childhood, the activities related to art-therapy regarding pre-schoolers are those connected to music, dancing, singing, drama, theatre, visual arts and crafts (NEA, 2004)

"Art is the result of deliberate alignment of items (generally having a symbolic significance) which influences one or more senses, feelings or the intellect. It consists of a wide variety of human activities, creations and ways of expression including music, literature, film, photography and painting" (Vatavu, 2015, p. 45).

The pedagogical approach of art is fundamental in the theories put forward by Itten, Kandinsky and Klee; these ones operate with the laws of form and colour perception based on feelings not on the

intellect. Their belief was that the proportion among body, spirit and soul depends on emotional factors which are definitory in the process of creation. Their theories have influenced both the theory of art and the domain of psychology (Wagner, 2005).

Moreover, besides the fact that art-therapy is used in mental health, it is also known for its ability of promoting social and advocacy changes, offering help in establishing educational objectives, both in the educational domain and outside medicine (Moon, 2016).

For pre-schoolers, drawing comes as a privileged means even when he has learnt how to write, drawing still remains a seductive technique for them. Pre-schoolers' drawing is a genuine language; children find their strength in the image they draw. Preschoolers' drawing has often been analysed and connected to a way of making themselves appreciated by their social group, the quality of graphic production. Children's drawings are, consequently, described in negative terms, lacking similarity or details (Blank et al., 1984).

Among the advantages of using drawing for personal development regarding pre-schoolers, there are: development of visual thinking (Arnheim, 2009); developing divergent thinking and contributing to children's social, ethical and moral development (Herne et al., 2009; Hickman, 2010); development of taking-decision process and development of the visual learning style (Kohl & Solga, 1997).

Music therapy can be defined as a planned process, oriented towards objectives connected to interaction and intervention based on assessment of children in difficulty, in which musical experiences (e.g., playing an instrument, dancing or song writing) are prescribed in order to positively influence their thoughts, feelings, emotions and behaviour (Peters, 2000).

Music therapy aims at "wisely using music as a therapeutical instrument to maintain, to reestablish and improve the mental, physical and emotional health of the person" (Preda, 2004, p. 124).

The advantages that music has on increasing the efficiency of preschoolers' development, are:

- Music represents a facilitator which affects efficiency, as it allows preschoolers to experience the emotional arousal via musical elements and offers an environment which can be controlled (Gaston & Schneider, 1965).
- Music can represent an immediate reward for children: due to the immediate auditory feedback, music allows preschoolers to develop extrinsic motivation, at the same time offering a feeling of accomplishment (Chou & Choi, 2006).
- Music helps pre-schoolers improve their self-image, respectively their self-esteem. Via music, an environment will come into being, having a positive impact on the development of self-efficiency, developing their self-trust in accomplishing a successful task (Chou & Choi, 2006).

Puppet therapy "gives the child the chance to bring inner stories outside and onto a stage. Children often do not have words but only pictures or symbols for these stories" (Gauda, 2001, p. 34 as cited in Kováčová, 2015).

Among the benefits of creating theatrical activities for pre-schoolers, there can be mentioned: developing personal individual resources (via theatre, there can be developed abilities connected to sensory perceptions, concentration power, verbal and emotional abilities (Vallins, 1971), promoting social skills (theatre implies team work, cooperation and competitive spirit as the final goal of every actor consists of being appreciated, (Omoera, 2011), promoting physical health (through theatrical activities

such as role-play, drama, improvised acting, pre-schoolers can develop a high level of happiness and contribute to their physical state (Omoera, 2011) and develops creativity (theatrical activities represent an important means in stimulating creativity via agency of drama, helping them take the initiative of creating beautiful art objects (Ebi, 2005).

### **3. Purpose of the Study**

The aim of this research consists of creating an intervention program based on developing certain acquisitions, skills, personal aptitudes of pre-schoolers by means of art-therapy, focusing on the following objectives:

- Assessing and identifying the level of abilities, personal skills of the participants in the program;
- Implementing an intervention program based on art-therapy, necessary to the personal development of pre-schoolers;
- Establishing the level of efficiency of the implemented program through re-assessing pre-schoolers' skills and aptitudes.

### **4. Research Methods**

#### **4.1. Hypothesis and Variables of the Research**

The hypothesis which started the creation of this research is the following:

Performing artistical activities regarding art-therapy is assumed to help the development of certain aptitudes, personal skills necessary to pre-schoolers.

The independent variable: the intervention program based on art-therapy

The dependent variables: creativity, fine motricity, expressing feelings, focused attention, self-esteem, patience and self-trust.

#### **4.2. Participants**

The participants in this program were pre-schoolers aged 5-6 ( $N=60$ ,  $M_{age}= 5$  years 4 months of age,  $SD_{age}=.31$ ), pre-schoolers attending no 9 Extended Program Kindergarten in Sighetu Marmatiei. Out of 60 participants, 25 are males and 35 are females.

The participants in this program were divided, as a result of the answers in the observation grid, in two groups: an experimental one (30 pupils) and a control one (30 pupils).

#### **4.3. Measures**

While doing the research, the observation grid was used.

Assessment represents, in a broad sense, the process of gathering information so as to take decisions (Odom & McLean, 1996). If we refer to the educational environment, for example kindergarten, assessment aims at observing every child's progress in order to facilitate, maximise or develop certain skills or intervene if there is atypical behaviour. Thus, the information obtained as a result of the

assessment, serves at: - highlighting the present skills of children and the skills that need to be developed; - maximising children's potential; - recommendation/planning of the intervention. While assessing, observation ensures gathering detailed information about the analysed child and also the minimal intervention in their activity for a genuine analysis of their behaviour, not an interaction with the assessment instrument (the advantages and disadvantages of this method are to be widely analysed at the end of this section) (Geangu et al., 2008).

The observation grid consists of 35 statements, 5 statements for each measured variable: creativity (e.g., pre-schoolers initiate original ideas and solutions during activities), fine motricity (e.g., pre-schoolers skillfully handle the instruments necessary in doing an activity), expressing feelings (e.g., pre-schoolers admit and express feelings while performing an activity and during other situations), self-trust (e.g., pre-schoolers decide for themselves what materials/instruments should use while performing an activity), patience (e.g., pre-schoolers wait for their turn while group activities and others), focused attention (e.g., pre-schoolers are concentrated on their colleagues when performing a group or an individual activity) and self-esteem (e.g., pre-schoolers value the tasks they perform). This grid was filled in via systematic observation directly with the education institution in order to ensure data privacy.

The items in the observation grid are rated on a Likert scale from 1 to 5, in which: 1 represents – “very difficult”, while 5 – “very easy”. The answers were scored as average marks; preschoolers who obtained low average marks were assessed as having difficulty in the measured skills.

#### **4.4. Procedure**

In order to test the theory of this research, the program had an experimental design. The experiment concerns observing and measuring the effects of manipulating an independent variable over a dependent variable, in a situation in which the action of other factors (effectively present, but stranger to the program) is reduced to the minimum (Festinger & Katz, 1953).

The independent variable is represented by the level of study and the skills necessary to personal development (measured by means of the Observation Grid) represent the dependent variables of this program. So as to prove the theory of a causal relation between a dependent variable and an independent one, the researcher, choosing an experimental plan, can create at least two stages (the pre-testing stage and the post-testing stage), two groups in which the participants of the former group (the experimental group) are subjects to an intervention and the participants of the latter group (the control group) can be subjects to another type of intervention or neither (Sava, 2011).

As a result of rating and interpreting the observation grid filled in for pre-schoolers, we observed that they come across difficulties regarding: creativity, fine motricity, expression of feelings, self-esteem, patience, self-trust and focused attention, thus, we decided to create an intervention program whose objective consists of elaborating a set of personal development activities which are to develop a high level of personal development abilities and skills in pre-schoolers.

In elaborating the activities necessary to the intervention program, the contents of learning modularly grouped in the curriculum “Personal Development” were taken into account; the program was structured into 9 artistical activities, 3 activities for each artistical branch chosen from art-therapy

(drawing, music and theatre); the program was carried out over a period of 5 months during academic year 2017-2018.

The objectives followed during the intervention program are: stimulating creativity, developing fine motricity, developing emotional intelligence skill – expressing feelings, developing focused attention, developing self-trust and self-esteem, developing the patience skill.

## 5. Findings

For the hypothesis of the study, Paired Samples t test was used to be able to see whether the proposed program has any influence on the variables measured for the participants in this study.

**Table 1.** Comparative analysis of the measured variables of the participants included in study in the pretest phase

Domains	Skills	Control group			Experimental group		
		N	Mean	SD	N	SD	Mean
<b>Visual-plastic arts &amp; Music</b>	<i>Creativity</i>	30	3.52	.48	30	1.66	.38
	<i>Emotional expressivity</i>	30	3.68	1.1	30	1.87	.30
<b>Theatre</b>	<i>Fine motor skills</i>	30	3.7	.38	30	2.58	.65
	<i>Focused attention</i>	30	4	.00	30	2.38	.63
	<i>Self-esteem</i>	30	3.73	.36	30	2.45	.35
<b>Theatre</b>	<i>Patience</i>	30	4	.00	30	2.78	.28
	<i>Self-confidence</i>	30	3.8	.42	30	2.67	.34

It was observed that the participants in the control group show high levels of the abilities necessary to personal independence which can be developed by means of painting, music and respectively, theatre, whereas the participants in the experimental group obtained low average marks in the following abilities: creativity (M=1.66), expressing emotions (M=1.87), fine motor abilities (M=2.58), focused attention (M=2.38), self-esteem (M=2.45), patience (M=2.78) and self-trust (M=2.67) (see table 01).

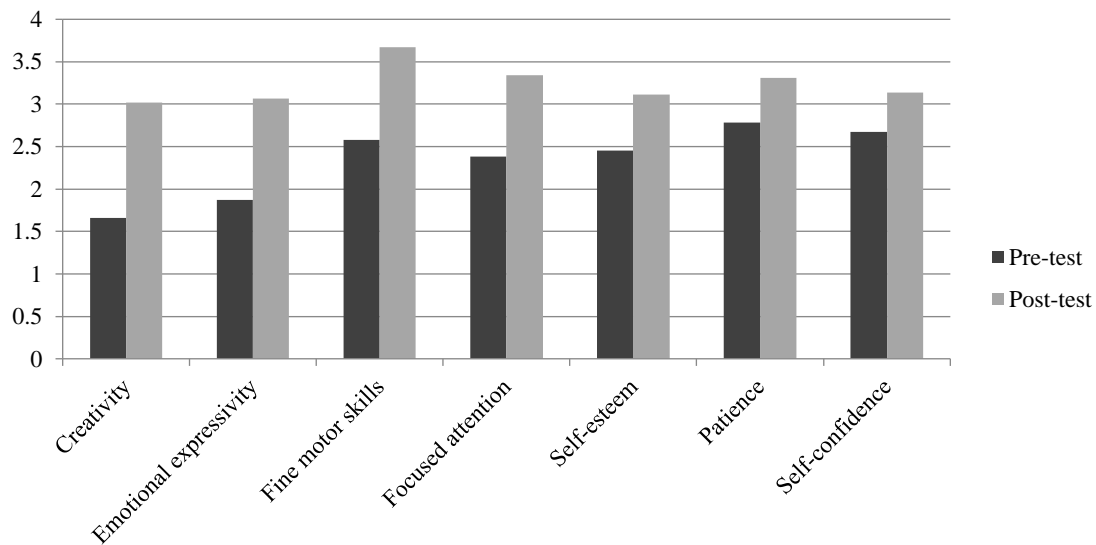
**Table 2.** Comparative analysis of the measured variables of the participants in the experimental group from pretest and posttest

			Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
<b>Pair 1</b>	<b>Creativity</b>	<i>before</i>	1,66	30	,38	,070
		<i>after</i>	3,02	30	,09	,018
<b>Pair 2</b>	<b>Emotional expressivity</b>	<i>before</i>	1,87	30	,30	,055
		<i>after</i>	3,07	30	,14	,026
<b>Pair 3</b>	<b>Fine motor skills</b>	<i>before</i>	2,58	30	,65	,119
		<i>after</i>	3,67	30	,34	,062
<b>Pair 4</b>	<b>Focused attention</b>	<i>before</i>	2,38	30	,63	,116
		<i>after</i>	3,34	30	,28	,052
<b>Pair 5</b>	<b>Self-esteem</b>	<i>before</i>	2,45	30	,35	,065
		<i>after</i>	3,11	30	,18	,033
<b>Pair 6</b>	<b>Patience</b>	<i>before</i>	2,78	30	,27	,051
		<i>after</i>	3,31	30	,27	,050
<b>Pair 7</b>	<b>Self-confidence</b>	<i>before</i>	2,67	30	,34	,062
		<i>after</i>	3,14	30	,21	,039

**Table 3.** Paired Samples t test Results

<i>Outcome</i>	<b>Pre-test</b>		<b>Post-test</b>		<b>N</b>	<b>95% CI for Mean Difference</b>	<b>r</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>df</b>
	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>					
<i>Creativity</i>	1.66	.38	3.02	.09	30	-1.49; -1.22	.36	20.5*	29
<i>Emotional expressivity</i>	1.87	.30	3.07	.14	30	-1.32; -1.06	-.10	18.63*	29
<i>Fine motor skills</i>	2.58	.65	3.67	.34	30	-1.26; -.90	.69	12.27*	29
<i>Focused attention</i>	2.38	.63	3.34	.28	30	-1.12; -.74	.74	11.20*	29
<i>Self-esteem</i>	2.45	.35	3.11	.18	30	-.80; -.52	.15	9.72*	29
<i>Patience</i>	2.78	.28	3.31	.27	30	-.63; -.40	.37	9.21*	29
<i>Self-confidence</i>	2.67	.34	3.14	.21	30	-.58; -.35	.45	8.27*	29

\*p < 0.01



**Figure 1.** Graphical representation of the measured variables in two experimental phases

After having analysed the results in table 02 and table 03, it can be said that there is improvement of the level of abilities which can be developed via painting and music [creativity (M=3.02), emotional expressiveness (M=3.07), fine motor abilities (M=3.67) and focused attention (M=3.34)] (M=3.69), and also those via theatre: self-esteem (M=3.11), patience (M=3.31) and self-trust (M=3.14) (see also the figure 01.). Thus, as a result of calculating test t for pair samples, there is  $t(29) = 20.5$ ,  $p=0.00$  for creativity;  $t(29)=18.63$ ,  $p=0.00$  for emotional expressiveness;  $t(29)=12.27$ ,  $p=0.00$  for fine motor abilities;  $t(29)=11.20$ ,  $p=0.00$  for focused attention;  $t(29)=9.72$ ,  $p=0.00$  for self-esteem;  $t(29)=9.21$ ,  $p=0.00$  for patience and  $t(29)=8.27$ ,  $p=0.00$  for self-trust; as t is significant for all 7 pairs, the result is that there is a significant difference between the two pre-testing and post-testing conditions. By calculating the level of effect for the 7 pairs, there is  $d=2.37$ , which means, according to Cohen (1988), that the intervention program had a great impact on the abilities investigated for the pre-school participants in the study. In conclusion, the hypothesis of the study is confirmed.

## 6. Conclusion

The knowing activity of pre-schoolers results in preschoolers showing positive effects in the following directions: “learning, training, optimization, individualized and stimulating formative accurate assessment, adequate counseling, assisted self-awareness” (Glava & Glava, 2002, pp. 28-30).

The pre-schooling period is mainly the development stage in which “dependence and self-determination co-exist” (Ciofu, 1998, p. 84). Children’s independent behaviour depends on “the way natural development is stimulated, creating social-affective safety situations in which and through which children follow their natural development, developing children’s own potential, stimulating initiatives, (semi)-guiding the activities children gladly perform on their own initiative” (Stan, 2016, p. 35).

Art-therapy is a “complementary clinical method, not being able to replace psycho-therapy or medication and uses as working techniques, diverse artistical methods such as music (music therapy), theatre (drama therapy) or fine arts (the therapy using visual-plastic art)” (Vatavu, 2015, p. 48).

After having applied the intervention program, the results which can be developed by means of painting, music and theatre were improved, thus, the average marks of the experimental group almost equal the level of the average marks of the control group. Therefore, the conclusion is that performing artistical activities of art-therapy within the intervention program helps the development of certain aptitudes, personal skills necessary to pre-schoolers, which means that the research theory is confirmed.

A limitation of the research would be the number of the participants in this research. Owing to the fact that the participants belonged to a single group, respectively, a single kindergarten, the results which prove that the intervention program has a significant impact on developing the skills necessary to personal independence through the art-therapy activities performed, the psycho-metrical properties regarding the efficiency of the individualized intervention program cannot be validated.

The second limitation of the research is the measuring and data collecting instrument. The observation grid being made up by us, its use is not validated and adapted to the Romanian population so that its psycho-metrical properties should stay unchanged.

A future research direction will consist of introducing a mediation analysis to test the relation among aggressiveness – intervention program based on art-therapy – counterfactual argument. Thus, according to this model, the activities performed via art-therapy will lead to developing the counterfactual argument which, in its turn, will decrease their level of aggressiveness. The counterfactual argument represents the pervasive psychological capacity which influences certain domains of thinking and functioning (Roese, 1997).

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