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## THE USE OF ART THERAPY INTERVENTIONS IN SCHOOLS TO SUPPORT SCHOOLCHILDREN IN THEIR HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

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**Key words:** *art therapy interventions, mental health, well-being, school, schoolchild*

**Ключові слова:** *арт-терапевтичні інтервенції, психічне здоров'я, благополуччя, школа, школяр*

**Abstract. The use of art therapy interventions in schools to support schoolchildren in their health and well-being. Faltová B., Mojžišová A.** *The paper explains the importance of art therapy interventions implemented in the school settings to support schoolchildren's health and well-being. The aim is a literature review as part of a dissertation at the University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice, Czech Republic, which deals with the possibilities for promoting well-being in schoolchildren, meeting their health and psychosocial needs in the context of their school and family environment. The Czech Republic lacks research on the direct implementation of art therapy interventions into the school environment, and the use of art therapy approaches within the Czech school context is unclear. Data for the literature search were obtained from recent Czech and international publications. We used the EDS multi-finder to search for literature sources. The document search was completed for the 2011–2023 period in Czech and English language. Search terms included School based art therapy, art therapy intervention, art therapy and schoolchildren's mental health, and schoolchildren's well-being. According to the results of the analysed literature, it is possible to conclude the benefits of art therapy interventions in schools as part of a holistic supportive approach of schools to their pupils and the environment in which they live. Art therapy, as a non-pharmacological medical complementary and alternative therapy, is considered as both prevention and an opportunity to address the acute need to support schoolchildren in their health and well-being. Art therapy interventions in the school setting can offer help in addressing a wide range of problems of schoolchildren, such as mental health issues, uncertainty in forming a child's identity, overcoming communication difficulties, addictive behaviours, anxiety, depressive moods associated with acute trauma, family conflicts, truancy and school failure. Art therapy interventions in the school setting can boost feelings of safety in the school environment along with comprehensive psychological, educational, and social interventions synthesizing the needs of the child, teacher, parents and other professionals working together to support the health and well-being of schoolchildren.*

**Реферат. Використання арт-терапевтичних заходів у школах для підтримки здоров'я та благополуччя дітей шкільного віку. Фалтова Б., Мойжишова А.** *У статті пояснюється важливість арт-терапевтичних втручань, які впроваджуються в шкільному середовищі для зміцнення здоров'я та благополуччя дітей шкільного віку. Метою статті є пошук літератури в рамках дисертації в Університеті Південної Чехії в Чесько-Будейовіце, у якій розглядають можливості підтримки благополуччя дітей шкільного віку, забезпечення їхнього здоров'я та психосоціальних потреб у контексті їхнього шкільного та сімейного середовища. У Чеській Республіці нам не вистачає досліджень щодо впровадження арт-терапевтичних втручань безпосередньо в шкільне середовище, а використання підходів арт-терапії в чеській школі є невизначеним. Дані для огляду літератури були отримані з актуальних чеських та закордонних публікацій. Для пошуку літературних джерел використовувався мультишукач. Пошук документів введено за період 2011-2023 рр. чеською та англійською мовами. Пошукові терміни включали шкільну арт-терапію, арт-терапевтичне втручання, арт-терапію та психічне здоров'я школярів, благополуччя школярів. Згідно з результатами аналізу літератури, внесок арт-терапевтичних втручань у школи можна визначити як частину загального підходу школи до своїх учнів та середовища, в якому вони живуть. Арт-терапія, як немедикаментозна медична додаткова та альтернативна терапія, вважається як профілактикою, так і можливістю вирішення гострої потреби підтримки здоров'я та благополуччя дітей шкільного віку. Арт-терапевтичні інтервенції в шкільному середовищі можуть запропонувати допомогу у вирішенні широкого кола проблем школярів, наприклад: у сферах психічного здоров'я, невпевненості у формуванні особистості дитини, подолання труднощів спілкування, адиктивної поведінки, тривожних станів, депресивних настроїв, спричинених гострою травмою, сімейними конфліктами, прогулами та неуспішністю в школі. Арт-терапевтичне втручання в шкільному середовищі може підтримувати в дітей почуття безпеки в шкільному середовищі шляхом комплексного психологічного, педагогічного та соціального втручання, синтезуючи потреби дитини, вчителя, батьків та інших експертів, які працюють разом для підтримки здоров'я та благополуччя дітей шкільного віку.*

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which examines the well-being of children across its member countries, considers the child to be a social actor from a children rights perspective and places great emphasis on children's rights as people who experience well-being in the here and now [1]. To be able to do this, the OECD [1] claims that it is essential for countries to review their policies on children as a whole and to try to understand the complementarity of policies in terms of the human life cycle, which starts with the well-being of the child at school through the effects of policies aimed at meeting labour market, fertility, and gender equality needs and goals, which need to

be well understood. Lee and Yoo [2] explain the needs for ensuring schoolchildren's well-being in a global perspective, positing that children's subjective well-being is a composite of children's life experiences in many contexts, with the existence of significant variations by country due to family, school, and community influences on a child's life. Karkou [3] describes tested and proven practices towards significant promotion of mental health and well-being through art therapy interventions in schoolchildren, where the effectiveness of these interventions in the long term extends beyond the schooling of the pupils in that the skills acquired continue to help them overcome anxieties associated

particularly with experiences of bullying at school and problematic family environments. Stuckey et al. [4] consider the healing effects of art therapy intervention to be the mere participation in creative activities that can help people cope with stress and despair and mitigate the stress associated with a chronic mental illness.

An intent of this paper is to provide a literature review as part of a dissertation at the University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice, Czech Republic, which is concerned with promotion of the well-being of schoolchildren, meeting of their health and psychosocial needs in the context of their school and family environment. The paper aims to justify and support the incorporation of art therapy interventions into the environment of Czech primary schools.

#### METHODS OF RESEARCH

We searched several databases (Complementary Index, Academic Search Complete, Medline, Scopus, PubMed, ScienceDirect, Web of Science, and British Library EThOS) for relevant texts and papers. The search strategy included the words: 'school based art therapy' or 'art therapy intervention', 'schoolchildren's well-being' and 'well-being', and 'art therapy' and "schoolchildren's mental health". The EDS multi-finder was used to search for keywords in Czech. The search strategy included the following words (Booleans operators): 'arteterapie ve škole', 'mentální zdraví školních dětí', and 'arteterapeutické intervence'. The selection criteria were limited by the time period of publication of professional sources from 1 January 2011 through 31 March 2023.

#### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Dray [5] emphasises that health, and in particular the mental health of children and adolescents, is an important construct at a theoretical, clinical and policy level, as on global scale mental disorders (depression, alcohol abuse, bipolar affective disorder, schizophrenia and obsessive-compulsive disorder) account for half of the top ten causes of disability and premature death. We can add the statistics published by Stewart [6] describing the situation particularly in Europe, where approximately a quarter of the population reported suffering from at least one mental disorder, usually with symptoms such as feelings of sadness and/or depression, withdrawal from social life, anger, substance abuse, and suicidal thoughts. A specific example from European countries can be mentioned from the national survey on the state of mental health in children and adolescents entitled Mental Health and Young People in England 2020 [7] which shows that rates of mental illness continue to grow among schoolchildren in England, both boys and girls. There is an official government activity to

support positive mental health in schoolchildren as a follow-up upon these research findings, with the Department for Education in the UK publishing an electronic, publicly available guide for schools entitled Mental health and behaviour in schools [8] to understand the protective factors that increase resilience in schoolchildren to the challenges they face in their lives. This guidebook [8] emphasises the supportive role of school in helping schoolchildren with less supportive family backgrounds who may not have a trusted adult to talk to and therefore school should be a healthy and safe place for children to develop a sense of belonging, well-being and feel able to trust adults. These recommendations are in line with the Social, Emotional and Mental Well-Being in Primary and Secondary Education: NICE guideline, published by The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) [9], on the emotional well-being of school children, noting that it is important that schools approach children in a holistic way to support their mental health, social well-being, support a sense of well-being, help them find new ways of self-expression, help children process challenging experiences, and better understand themselves.

Within the Czech Republic, the Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MŠMT), under the authorship of Fryč et al. [10], has published a strategic document for education entitled Strategy of the Educational Policy of the Czech Republic up to the year 2030+, describing the current state of Czech education and intentions for the future direction of pupils' education in Czech schools, where a safe environment in schools is described as problematic, among other things. According to the above MŠMT strategy [10], compared to the international average, Czech pupils do not have a good relationship with school, they like going to school the least among all OECD countries, their reluctance to attend school increases at the end of the first grade of primary school and is greater among boys. The issue of risky behaviour is part of this, with the most frequently addressed problems being poor relationships among classmates, violation of school rules, bullying and cyberbullying, with a lack of emphasis on psychohygiene, where there are almost no programmes for the prevention of depression, anxiety, harmful stress, and suicide. Schoolchildren do not have enough mental health information, and a significant percentage of them are shown to experience school-related anxiety [10]. Zubala and Karkou [11] investigated the nature of art therapy process and they found that art therapies are significant support to the treatment of depression and the formation of healthy environments for improved well-being. Savytska et al. [12] recognize a psychologically corrective influence that

activates the reflection of a person's inner world in the therapeutic effect of art therapy, which provides psychological support through creative self-expression. The art therapy method is based on the mechanism of projecting emotional experiences of the client's personality, in order to restore health while activating the internal mechanisms of emotional self-regulation through creativity reflecting the emotional world of the individual in conscious and unconscious manifestations [12]. Art therapy significantly support children's emerging health needs since they are allowed to be fully emotionally engaged and share their experiences that they may not have otherwise expressed merely through words [13]. Nielsen et al. [14] emphasize the benefits of art therapy for its natural way of creative work in which children and teenagers can safely express themselves and learn to understand how their thoughts are related to their feelings. Šicková-Fabrice [15] presents art therapy and the importance of art therapy interventions, as a treatment through art, which through artistic expression in an individual's own process of creation can provide a change in an individual's self-esteem in a positive sense, bring meaning to the fulfilment of one's life journey in harmony with oneself, and support mental health and well-being.

Valenta et al. [16] see the involvement of artistic expression at least in some form for the addressing each type of client's problem in the current trends of art therapy. Ottarsdottir [17] describes the positive effects of the art therapy process on depressed children who experienced stress trauma and had specific learning problems. According to Shukla et al. [18], art therapy is most commonly used to treat mental illness and can help control symptoms correlated with psychosocially challenging behaviours, slow cognitive decline, and promote well-being. Hu et al. [19] emphasise that art therapy, as a non-pharmacological medical complementary and alternative therapy, has been used as one of the medical interventions with good clinical effects for the treatment of mental disorders, but to date, a systematic and detailed review of the effects in clinical situations is still lacking. Among others, the need for art therapy interventions, for example, in children traumatized by domestic violence, is recommended by Malchiodi [20], not only for the acute need for emotional stabilization to successfully cope with compulsory school attendance, but also for the future prospects of one's own life path with the maximum possible level of well-being. Chiumento et al. [21] point out the benefit of the school environment in terms of a natural way to reach children in providing counselling and supportive services to them; some problems can be adequately resolved, and many of the difficulties

associated with visits to clinics and doctor's offices can be avoided. Based on her study results, Deboys [22] recommends art therapy for children to psychologists as it can facilitate verbalization of their difficulties. She also makes the recommendation for clinical practice that the therapy experience should be rather fun and enjoyable for the child. For schools, the aforementioned author of the study [22] considers the incorporation of art therapy into school curricula to be useful due to its potential to improve children's academic achievement. The therapeutic effects of art therapy in schoolchildren can prevent the widening gap in educational attainment, which can be the cause of social, emotional and mental difficulties in their future [23].

According to Kantor et al. [24], the way in which art therapies are applied and used in education in the Czech Republic is not clearly outlined and the application of art therapies in the educational environment of Czech schools is based mainly on the experience of individual therapists, and what is more, there is a lack of systematic studies offering a research outline of the implementation of therapeutic interventions in the school environment, which focus on the collection of consistent data directly from the art therapists' practice.

Lhotová and Perout [25] describe a way to achieve therapy goals for the clients through their work with their own artistic creations called artefacts, where by naming and incorporating an artefact into a logical causality relationship, they gain a sense of control, reducing anxiety and the lack of control over their internal experience. According to Slavík et al. [26], a dialogue about the artistic creation process can confront its innovative components with its reproductive components, motivating the content interpretation to ask questions that deepen cognition and understanding in an emerging space linking the creation with a person's own self-cognition, especially in a comparative critical dialogue revealing the relationships between the content of the artistic creation and the world reconstructed through a cultural input of its author. In a school environment where the educator directs the pupil to create for cognition in accordance with educational tasks, it is the responsibility of the educator to bring the pupil to an understanding of his/her own artistic creation through constructive dialogue. The pupil must grasp the content of his/her creation to the best of his/her ability, in his/her own way, and in order to understand it he/she must be able to place it in the context of external conditions and his/her internal structural relationships [26].

The intimacy and closeness of art therapy intervention, according to Berberian and Davis [27],

may be a new phenomenon in school settings that often shows student achievement, and where school workers and also parents can focus more on student performance with a prioritization of school achievement at all costs, which is at odds with the holistic aim of art therapy interventions, and therefore extra care should be taken to ensure that artefacts created in art therapy are handled with great sensitivity and only disclosed with a pupil's consent. Therefore, according to the aforementioned authors [27], we need to discuss potential vulnerabilities associated with classmates' views on art created in the context of art therapy with pupils, while a full awareness of the school culture is essential for an art therapist working in the school settings. And also, by collaboration with a classroom teacher, a school art therapist can design classroom interventions that support school performance as well as emotional resilience of pupils. In the International Survey of Children's Well-being carried out by Nahkur and Kutsar [28], the authors listed factors of interpersonal destructiveness among 12-year-old schoolchildren from 14 different countries. The factors include low life satisfaction, previous experience of destructive interpersonal conflicts, subjective economic insecurity, individual factors of the children's destructiveness such as poor parenting, poor relationship climate, and fragile community as immediate environmental factors negatively affecting children's subjective mental well-being, even after taking into account broader social and cultural context factors. In a research study, Ramirez et al. [29] reflected on art therapy involving schoolchildren as an engaging activity that has the ability to enhance positively balanced emotions in those who already felt comfortable in the school environment and to promote the transformation of negative emotions in those who were struggling in school. In the structured art therapy intervention, participants in the study [29] reported that they felt relaxed, proud, and confident after creating their artefact, despite their initial fears about artistic creation, which is consistent with the art therapy creative process transforming emotions while venting negative feelings and experiencing metaphorical self-exploration. In their research study, Ratnik and Rūitel [30] explored the first sets of experience with the introduction of art therapy in Estonian schools and evaluated the effect of art therapy on children's adaptation to their school environment as supportive, where an art therapist compliments the work of the school support system towards achieving educational goals with an emphasis on the developmental potential of pupils. This research [30] has also emphasised the range of possibilities for the development of art therapy in schools in collaboration with a school psychologist and local community,

enhancing the potential of art therapists in further training of educators to increase their knowledge and skills in using simple art elements to work with emotions in the classroom within the curriculum of each subject. In a study by Quinlan et al. [31], creative art therapy programmes provided by qualified therapeutic professionals were identified as effective for adolescents affected by adversity, where the effectiveness of implementing art therapy to address the psychosocial needs of schoolchildren from refugee backgrounds to support their well-being was demonstrated. The findings of the study [31] demonstrated an effect specifically on reducing behavioural disorders and emotional symptoms of the study participants. The study findings provided empirical support for school-based creative art therapy programmes specific for schoolchildren with refugee status.

A pilot randomised controlled study by Moula et al. [32] investigated the effectiveness of several series of art therapy interventions in schoolchildren on their health-related quality of life (assessed by the HRQOL rating scale; EQ-5D-Y); life satisfaction (assessed by the CORS rating scale); emotional and behavioural difficulties (assessed by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire; SDQ); and sleep duration, where the effects of each intervention were monitored and evaluated after three, six, and twelve months of treatment. The final findings in this study [26] confirm that art therapy interventions had clinically significant positive effects on life functioning, sleep duration, and emotional and behavioural problems. Also, Braitto et al. [33] confirm that there is some evidence that art therapy or art psychotherapy may be beneficial for children who have experienced trauma or who show signs of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Berberian [34] describes the implementation of art therapy programmes in the US schools, where schoolchildren can receive individual and group services from a school art therapist as a recommended mental health intervention based on referrals from teachers, parents, classmates, social workers, or psychologists, with all of these services being referred to as 'therapy by art' to eliminate the feared stigma associated with mental health interventions. Schoolchildren respond very well to the name 'art therapy', apparently perceiving greater freedom in presenting their problems in terms of, for example, intense psychological distress in the areas of self-harm, abuse, or domestic violence, and generally very much welcome the support of school-based art therapy by feeling seen, heard, and directly supported for 45 minutes during the school day [34]. An art therapist is also said to provide immediate assistance in emergencies, discussing confidentiality of therapy along with the reasons for referral to therapy when talking with the

student. Together they look to identify the student's strengths, developmental stressors, and formulate therapy goals, and in this way, it can also be stated that the school climate is cultivated through social and emotional support even when schoolchildren are exposed to deteriorating family backgrounds, and their well-being is threatened [34]. Robinson's study [35] draws similar conclusions when the comprehensive results of her qualitative research indicated not only the popularity of art therapy interventions with pupils, but also the high job satisfaction of art therapists, who reported that they valued working in a school setting as a pleasant experience of working with professionals in schools and having an intensive communication link with pupils' parents.

Campbell [36] considers the benefits of art therapy in schools to be the strength of the pupils' relationship with an art therapist, who promotes mastery of the skill of creating an artwork, with a sense that there can be no 'wrong answers' in art, and also the value pupils place on the process is in their pride in the finished artwork. Pupils perceive the art therapist's positive, non-judgmental approach to helping them feel dignified in this way. They are able to express themselves through their artwork in a more positive way compared to the difficulty of verbalizing a problem or situation. They are also able to express their experiences without the fear of being judged or the fear of having to communicate more specific details of their inner experience if they do not want to [36]. The findings of Regev's research [37] on the effect of art therapy on school children have shown that in the educational system, cognitive-behavioral research is an important variable, where models such as the cognitive-behavioral approach appear to be useful and art therapy with children in general within the school setting are more complex than is typically assumed for art therapy. Snir [38] points to research findings on the relationship between the art-creation experience in art therapy emphasising the importance of the positive experience of the creative process in the treatment of, for example, mental and psychosomatic difficulties, raising interesting questions about the factors that create this positive experience and encouraging future research to focus on these issues.

The experiences of most informants in the qualitative study by Harpazi et al. [39] suggest the benefits of therapeutic intervention for schoolchildren who appreciated disconnecting from their daily routine specifically by turning off their mobile phones and thus being able to focus undisturbed on themselves while creating artefacts. Markland's [40] study draws attention to the importance of planning support for schoolchildren with complex medical, psychosocial needs and developmental trauma, where the easy

accessibility of children's participation in school-based art therapy may play an important role. This is also linked to the benefit of saving on the future financial costs of services for adolescents in mental health institutions, where setting of the maximum possible level of support for emotional stability, mental health, and well-being of schoolchildren, meeting their psychosocial needs, and their ability to function socially and engage in school far outweighs the initial costs of interventions [40].

### CONCLUSIONS

1. The aim of the study was to understand the importance of art therapy interventions and to clarify their benefits for schoolchildren, especially in response to the still unclear implementation of art therapy interventions in Czech schools.

2. The literature review provides a wide range of possibilities and inspirations for the application of art therapy in schools to support the health and well-being of schoolchildren.

3. The provision of art therapy services in schools provides an opportunity for immediate response to traumatic experiences of schoolchildren and can thus significantly limit the problems associated with attending hospital settings.

4. Art therapy interventions in the school setting can contribute to the resolution of a wide range of difficulties for schoolchildren, such as anxiety, self-harm, communication barriers, depression stemming from acute trauma, school failure, truancy, addictive behaviours, chronic abuse problems, family conflict, and the formation of pupil's identity.

5. Art therapy interventions in the school setting also appear to be effective as part of a comprehensive psychological, educational, and health-social intervention that promotes mutual understanding between the needs of the child, educator, and parent.

6. Art therapy interventions have the potential to support the maintenance or restoration of mental health and well-being of schoolchildren and thus contribute to a healthy school and community environment in which children grow and develop into healthy individuals.

7. Although research studies have demonstrated the positive impact of the effects of art therapy interventions on children's health and well-being, there is still a lack of such studies, and it is desirable to conduct scientifically based research in this direction with the collection of validated evidence to support, and at the same time eliminate, the risks of implementing art therapy interventions in the Czech school environment.

### Contributors:

Faltová B. – conceptualization, investigation, methodology, writing – review & editing;

Mojžišová A. – supervision, writing – review & editing.

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