

EXPLORING ARTISTIC POTENTIAL IN YOUNG PEOPLE WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER. EXPLORATORY STUDY

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Abstract. The study assesses the artistic potential of children and young people with autism spectrum disorders using an online questionnaire administered to 197 parents and professionals, respectively, their inclination for a certain type of artistic activity, and the benefits of art therapy. In addition to data related to the preferred artistic fields and the benefits of involvement in artistic activities, information was collected related to communication skills, verbal or motor imitation, memorization, or expression of emotions. Following the analysis of the results, it emerged that young people are primarily attracted to music and visual arts, and artistic activities contribute in particular to relaxation, improving self-esteem, and learning new things. Other benefits of artistic activities are: exploring the space around them, adapting to new situations, and increasing the degree of independence. Artistic activities would also help young people become aware of their emotions and express them appropriately. Parents and professionals believe that approximately one-third of young people with autism spectrum disorders have low verbal expression, memory, and imitation skills. For this reason, the artistic activities in which they can be involved should contain tasks of varying degrees of difficulty, from very simple to more complex tasks that involve creativity.

Keywords: young people with ASD, assessment of artistic potential, art therapy.

Résumé : L'étude évalue le potentiel artistique des enfants et des jeunes autistes à l'aide d'un questionnaire en ligne administré à 197 parents et professionnels, ainsi que leur intérêt pour un type d'activité artistique et les bienfaits de l'art-thérapie. Outre les données relatives aux domaines artistiques privilégiés et aux bénéfices de la participation à des activités artistiques, des informations ont été recueillies sur les compétences en communication, l'imitation verbale ou motrice, la mémorisation et l'expression des émotions. L'analyse des résultats a révélé que les jeunes sont principalement attirés par la musique et les arts visuels, et que les activités artistiques contribuent notamment à la relaxation, à l'amélioration de l'estime de soi et à l'apprentissage de nouvelles connaissances. Les activités artistiques offrent également d'autres avantages : l'exploration de l'espace qui les entoure, l'adaptation à de nouvelles situations et le développement de l'autonomie. Les activités artistiques aideraient également les jeunes à prendre conscience de leurs émotions et à les exprimer de manière appropriée. Les parents et les professionnels

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estiment qu'environ un tiers des jeunes autistes présentent des difficultés d'expression verbale, de mémoire et d'imitation. Pour cette raison, les activités artistiques dans lesquelles ils peuvent être impliqués devraient contenir des tâches de différents degrés de difficulté, allant des tâches très simples aux tâches plus complexes qui impliquent la créativité.

Mots-clés : jeunes avec TSA, évaluation du potentiel artistique, art-thérapie.

Rezumat. Studiul evaluează potențialul artistic al copiilor și tinerilor cu tulburări din spectrul autist utilizând un chestionar aplicat on-line la 197 de părinți și profesioniști, respectiv înclinația lor pentru un anumit tip de activitate artistică și beneficiile art-terapiei. Pe lângă datele legate de domeniile artistice preferate și beneficiile implicării în activitățile artistice, au fost culese informații legate de abilitățile de comunicare, de imitare verbală sau motorie, de memorare sau de exprimare a emoțiilor. În urma analizei rezultatelor a reieșit că tinerii sunt atrași în primul rând de muzică și arte vizuale, iar activitățile artistice contribuie în special la relaxarea, îmbunătățirea stimei de sine și învățarea de lucruri noi. Alte beneficii ale activităților artistice sunt: explorarea spațiului din jurul lor, adaptarea la situații noi și creșterea gradului de independentă. De asemenea, activitățile artistice îi ajută pe tineri să devină conștienți de emoțiile lor și să le exprime în mod adecvat. Părinții și profesioniștii sunt de părere că aproximativ o treime dintre tinerii cu tulburări din spectrul autist au capacitați scăzute de exprimare verbală, memorare și imitare. Din acest motiv, activitățile artistice în care pot fi implicate trebuie să conțină sarcini cu diferite grade de dificultate, de la foarte simple, până la sarcini mai complexe, care implică creativitatea.

Cuvinte cheie: tineri cu TSA, evaluarea potențialului artistic, art-terapie.

1. Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by difficulties in social relationships, communication, and the presence of repetitive and stereotyped behaviours or interests. Individuals with ASD are affected by changes in routine. They may exhibit many undesirable behaviours, such as self-harm, unmanageable mood swings, hyperactivity, aggression, reduced attention, temper tantrums, sleep problems, and obsessive-compulsive traits (Genovese & Butler, 2023). Another symptom that can affect individuals with ASD is sensory hypo- or hypersensitivity, which can impact light, sound, smell, taste, touch, balance, and body awareness (Christopher, 2019). Although individuals with ASD face many challenges, they have a variety of strengths, such as visual processing (Round *et al.*, 2017).

The increasing prevalence of ASD worldwide, estimated at 1 in 65 children (Zeidan *et al.*, 2022), justifies the interest in finding a treatment. In addition to widely accepted rehabilitation therapies, such as behavioural, speech, physical, and occupational therapy, and medication, there is a growing interest in alternative therapies, such as art therapy. These alternative therapies have great potential, both as viable alternatives and as complements to classical therapies (Martínez-Vérez *et al.*, 2024).

This research was conducted within an Erasmus+ project "Art for Autism - Artistic methods and tools for empowering youth with autism spectrum disorders", reference no. 2023-1-RO01- KA220-YOU-000151909 (Popovici *et al.*,

2024). The goal that we pursued in the research was to identify the artistic capacities of young people with ASD and to reveal the benefits that art therapy can bring. The collection of this information was necessary in order to improve the activities carried out with this target group.

The goal of our research was to identify the artistic potential of young people with ASD and to find the benefits that art therapy can bring. Gathering this information is necessary to improve the activities carried out with this target group.

We chose this age segment because most of the research and services offered focus on young children. Although a large part of people with ASD remain vulnerable in adolescence or as adults and would need support services, the chances of receiving help decrease with increasing age (Francileudo & Pereira, 2021; Ishler *et al.*, 2022; Platós & Pisula, 2019).

From the specialized literature (Durrani, 2014; Farhana *et al.*, 2024; Deleon, 2024), it appears that art therapy is one of the most effective interventions that could provide benefits to people with ASD because it has a wide scope, uses a variety of materials, and employs a wide range of techniques. For this reason, art therapy can be adapted and individualized to the specific interests and preferences of people with ASD, as well as the difficulties they have. Being a nonverbal form of creative expression, art therapy helps people with ASD to communicate and express their feelings without using words, thus contributing to improving self-image and confidence.

Increasing social skills, relationships, and teamwork is achieved by conducting art therapy activities in a group. Given that art therapy activities can be conducted in a group, teamwork and social skills are enhanced. Since a wide range of artistic materials, with different colours and textures, can be used, art therapy can act as a way of sensory regulation for people with hyper- or hypo-sensitivity. Structured tasks, repetitive and rhythmic nature of art creation promote relaxation and inner balance, and artistic creation processes can be because they can be adapted to individual preferences for visual information. First, we will define art therapy, what its strengths are, and how it addresses the specific needs of autism.

2. Dimension of art therapy

Art therapy is defined by Francileudo and Pereira (2021) as the use of artistic materials and techniques in a controlled and positive environment to interact meaningfully with clients, both verbally and non-verbally. There are several types of therapy that use the arts to communicate and build a relationship, such as music therapy and dance therapy, visual arts therapy, drama therapy, creative writing, and photography.

Several studies have shown that expressive art therapies can be efficient in improving these conditions and promoting positive behaviour. Martínez-Vérez *et al.* (2024) emphasize that art therapy directly addresses the key needs of people with ASD, acting on behaviour and communication, on balance, motor skills,

hand-eye coordination, as well as on cognitive and emotional skills. Vogel *et al.* (2024) conducted a meta-analysis indicating that art therapy in children and adolescents improves communication and interpersonal relationships, increases concentration and assertiveness, and develops fine motor skills, balance, and flexibility. Round *et al.* (2017) found that art therapy helps children with ASD to better communicate their feelings and emotions, thereby improving the quality of life for both them and their families. They also found that art therapy increases self-esteem and general well-being, reduces hyperactivity or inattention, contributes to sensory regulation, and leads to greater flexibility to change. Accordino *et al.* (2007) followed the positive effects on socialization and communication of people with ASD following music therapy. The authors showed an increase in social participation, reciprocal interactions, and eye contact, and a reduction in anxiety and aggression. Corbett *et al.* (2011) conducted an experiment in which 8 children with ASD were involved in a drama intervention program, alongside typically developing children, who acted as role models. This program aimed to improve socio-emotional functioning. Pre- and post-test neuropsychological, biological (cortisol and oxytocin), and behavioural measures showed improvements in social perception skills (face memory, expression of emotions) and adaptive functioning.

3. Methodology

The purpose of this research was to assess the artistic capabilities of children and young people with autism spectrum disorders, as well, their inclination for a certain form of art. At the same time, we aimed to identify the benefits of involvement in such activities. We also collected information related to communication skills, verbal or motor imitation, memorization, or expression of emotions, to increase the quality and variety of artistic activities for ASD young people.

To achieve these objectives, we designed a quantitative research approach, and the research subjects were both parents of young people with autism spectrum disorders aged between 13 and 20 years old and professionals (teachers, trainers involved in the education of ASD youth). The study included 197 respondents, selected from 5 European countries, Romania, Greece, Portugal, Italy, and Lithuania, through institutions and associations that provide artistic education services or pursue the social integration of disadvantaged people. The data were collected online through the Google platform. The proportion of respondents by country was as follows: 43% Romania, 18% Italy, 17% Portugal, 15% Greece, and 7% Lithuania.

The data collection instrument consisted of a 20-item questionnaire. Most questions involved choosing a single answer from several options, 5 items allowed multiple choice, while 9 items involved evaluation on a 4-point Likert scale, from „1 – low” to „4 – very high”. The introduction described the purpose of the research and specified that they could withdraw from the research at any time if they wished.

4. Results

The analysis of the results revealed that young people with ASD are primarily attracted to music (32%) and visual arts (29%), drama (17%), dance (15%), and creative writing (6%). The artistic fields that help young people with ASD to express themselves creatively are music (25%), art (25%), and dance (21%). Parents and teachers believe that theatre can make a contribution of 16%, while writing and photography are chosen too little.

The most important artistic fields that benefit young people are considered to be music (31%), art (25%), and dance (10%). According to the opinions of parents and teachers, artistic activities bring young people a number of benefits, such as relaxation (22%), improving self-esteem (21%), acquiring new knowledge (20%), and increasing creativity (18%). In a smaller degree, these activities could lead them to make friends. Parents and support teachers (32%) believe that through art, young people with ASD develop and express a positive mental state (32%), creativity (29%), and artistic skills (26%). Almost half of parents and teachers (49%) believe that young people would dedicate between 1-3 hours per week to their favourite activity, while 39% believe that they would allocate between 3-5 hours, and 10% between 5-7 hours. Almost three-quarters of participants to the survey (72%) revealed that autistic youth have been involved in artistic activities in the past, with the most practiced being visual arts (26%), music (25%), dance (24%), and drama (17%). Almost 70% of young people currently practice an artistic activity. The most common reasons for stopping this activity are lack of time, financial difficulties, but also the fact that they no longer like it or do not want to go.

The communication skills of young people, necessary for teachers to know how to better involve young people in activities, are assessed as follows: 39% of young people have a good capacity for verbal expression, 41% understand and succeed to express their needs verbally, while 18% are able to express themselves predominantly non-verbally. Respondents assess that most (71%) of young people have a good and very good capacity for verbal imitation or replication of standard sentences, while 29% of them have a low and very low capacity.

The written expression capacity of young people was assessed by parents and professionals as low and very low (55%), while only 19% assessed it as very good. These results explain why creative writing is the artistic field very little preferred by the target group.

Autistic youth find it easier to imitate family members or friends (31%), video actions (21%), various sounds made with or without musical instruments (20%), and images (20%). In contrast, unknown people could be imitated by young people with ASD in only a proportion of 7%. Regarding the motor imitation capacity, which occurs in dance or pantomime activities, it is assessed as high and very high (68%) and low and very low in 38% of cases. The same results were obtained for the motor expression capacity/production of movements in a creative way, which are high and very high for 68%,

Parents or teachers assess that 59% of young people manage to express their negative feelings well and even very well, and 68% their positive ones.

Short-term memory is assessed as good and very good in 71% of cases, while 29% have a low and very low memory capacity, which means that they can be involved in simple tasks and need a visual prompt. Long-term memory is assessed as less efficient; in 67% of young people, it would be good and very good, and in 33% low and very low. Young people can most easily memorize melodies (24%) and various sounds (16%); on the other hand, they find it more difficult to memorize a written text (7%) or motor activities (8%).

5. Discussions

To our knowledge, this is the first study to assess the artistic potential of young people with ASD. Parents and professionals believe that autistic youth prefer music or visual arts activities because they involve non-verbal communication and visual elements. Writing or photography activities are less attractive because they require the ability to express themselves in writing, grammatical knowledge, imagination, and the ability to express emotions, which are more difficult to achieve by autistic youth. Photography involves the provision of equipment, technical knowledge, but also the ability to perceive expressiveness. One explanation for the fact that dance is not the preferred artistic activity is that young people with ASD have a low capacity for motor imitation. Also, difficulties in communication, expressing emotions, and verbal imitation make theatre a less. The most important benefits of involving young people with ASD in artistic activities would be the induction of a state of calm and relaxation, security and self-confidence, but also learning new things and increasing creativity.

Other research also confirms that autistic people are particularly attracted to music because they have innate musical abilities and simple instruments such as percussion or voice can be used (Martínez-Vérez *et al.*, 2024; Lipska & Leś, 2023; Accordino *et al.*, 2007). Music therapy has positive effects on the socialization and communication of autistic young people. It has been proven that this therapy increases social participation, mutual interactions, and eye contact, and reduces anxiety and aggression.

Other research (Martínez-Vérez *et al.*, 2024) has also found that visual arts therapy is a key intervention in ASD, helping to increase concentration, improve intellectual and linguistic skills. In contrast, other research shows that dance and movement are a second choice for people with ASD, after music therapy. Dance helps to reduce anxiety, increase relaxation, and increase body and self-awareness. The effects of art therapy on the ability to express feelings, achieve a state of relaxation, and improve self-esteem are consistent with other research. For example, Schweizer and colleagues (2017) interviewed art therapists who work with autistic youth. This research concludes that autistic young people become more flexible, more relaxed, express themselves easier and have improved abilities to discuss about their problems or frustrations. Art therapy also helps reduce children's behavioural problems and improve their self-image. These positive changes in behaviour are also transferred to other environments, for example, at home or at school. Bitan and Regev (2022) described how parent-child art therapy

helps children to express themselves better and learn new ways of relating to the outside world.

6. Conclusions

Autism Spectrum Disorder is a complex condition that requires a variety of approaches and treatment modalities to improve negative behaviours and symptoms. As it was observed that traditional treatments do not provide an important improvement, professionals in charge have begun to test alternative therapies and approaches, such as the use of creative arts as a form of treatment for this target group. Art therapy, being a multifocal intervention, acts on sensory, cognitive, and behavioural domains, which is why it is increasingly used.

We believe that it is important that, when implementing these therapies, individual and contextual factors are taken into account to maximize their effectiveness and accessibility. Consequently, art-based activities for autistic youth are recommended to include tasks with various degrees of difficulty. This approach accounts for the fact that roughly one-third of them demonstrate low capacities in areas like verbal expression, memorization, and imitation.

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