

# Art Therapy through the Eyes of Art Teachers: A Qualitative Study of Adolescents' Educational Practices

Yumeng Wu

Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia, Faculty of Educational Studies Universiti Putra Malaysia 43400 Serdang Selangor

Nur Aimi Nasuha Binti Burhanuddin

Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia, Department of Foundations of Education Faculty of Educational Studies Universiti Putra Malaysia 43400

Serdang Selangor

Corresponding Author Email: [aiminasuha@upm.edu.my](mailto:aiminasuha@upm.edu.my)

To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v13-i4/23165> DOI:10.6007/IJARPED/v13-i4/23165

**Published Online:** 12 November 2024

## Abstract

Art therapy activities have proven valuable in emotional expression, psychotherapy, cognitive development, and social interaction. However, at present in China, the popularity of art therapy is low, and teachers lack practical and theoretical experience as well as professional training in art therapy. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore art teachers' perceptions and challenges facing art therapy activities in school-based settings and provide insights into art teachers' professional training and policy making. This study utilized a qualitative case study to collect data through semi-structured interviews with three professional art teachers in a primary school in China. Thematic analysis was conducted in analyzing the research data. The main findings of the study showed that despite some challenges faced by the teachers, such as dealing with sudden changes in students' moods and a deep lack of knowledge about psychology, they had a positive attitude towards painting art therapy, and the participants described the art therapy activities as a release of stress, and activity for the unique expression of art. In future research, we encourage more schools and teachers at different grade levels to support art therapy activities for more age groups of youth to increase the representativeness and credibility of the study.

**Keywords:** Art Therapy, Adolescents, Art Teachers, Educational Practice, Qualitative Research

## Introduction

### *What is Art Therapy*

The idea of art therapy can be traced back to ancient cultures and the development of psychotherapy. Still, it was not widely developed and researched as a formal psychotherapeutic approach until the mid-20th century. The American Art Therapy Association (AATA) was founded in 1969, marking the formal recognition of art therapy. Since

then, the field of art therapy has continued to grow and develop as a powerful psychotherapeutic approach.

Art therapy activities are important in emotional expression, psychological healing, self-discovery, cognitive development, attention enhancement, and social interaction. It provides a safe, fun, and fulfilling environment for individuals. (Heenan, 2006)

### *Art Therapy and Chinese Adolescents*

As early as ten years ago, Chinese experts and educational scholars had already noticed the problems with the Chinese art education curriculum. Chinese people have usually separated perception and thinking into two unrelated and different fields. (Wu & Niu, 2014), With this perception, the Chinese education system has focused on the study and application of words and numbers, which has made the connection between art and education increasingly distant. Schools generally treat art courses as dispensable courses, and some even abandon them for the sake of promotion rates, making it difficult to achieve the desired results in art education. In recent years, some regions in China have begun to experiment with introducing practices similar to art therapy into compulsory education. For example, certain schools have added time for art creation in the curriculum, encouraging students to express their emotions through painting and handicrafts. This practice is supported by some policies, such as the "Implementation Opinions on Deepening Aesthetic Education in Primary and Secondary Schools" which mentions the need to strengthen the integration of aesthetic education and mental health education and to promote the overall development of students' physical and mental health.

Adolescence is critical to the development of an individual's self-esteem and self-perception. During this critical stage, adolescents face challenges of identity and self-evaluation, factors that can profoundly affect their mental health and social adjustment. At the same time, middle school students, in a pre-adolescent stage of development, experience important changes in self-perception and self-esteem. Therefore, exploring and supporting their development during this period becomes crucial. Therefore, practicing art therapy in compulsory education is not only possible but also feasible and necessary. This helps students better cope with academic and life pressure provides them with a broader space for development and cultivates more comprehensive talents (Zhao, 2023)

### *Current Research*

The act of producing artwork is very personal and can be very therapeutic. (Karkou & Glasman, 2004) The use of symbols and metaphors by children can assist them in comprehending their feelings and any issues they may be experiencing. According to one researcher, symbol-making is a crucial part of pupils' development since it stimulates their imagination. (Eisner, 1978) Not only that, but creative arts therapy has also been proven by research to give children a place where they can express and share their feelings, and where they can talk freely about troubles and relationships. (Gersch & Sao Joao Goncalves, 2006) In the area of interpersonal relationships, students, teachers, and classmates can gain a deeper understanding of the person who made the work by observing and interpreting the symbols and metaphors in a variety of ways throughout time. (Marshall, 2003) For children with sensory integration difficulties, there was also a significant improvement in behavior after therapeutic painting. (Kearns, 2004) In addition, there is a potential connection between the

visual arts and a rise in disadvantaged students' writing, reading, and math prowess and sympathetic behaviors (Robinson, 2013)

### *Gap and Limitations*

Painting art therapy is a psychotherapeutic approach to help individuals express their emotions, explore their inner feelings, solve problems, and improve their self-awareness through painting and art making. Malchiodi (2012), This therapeutic approach has been widely used across age groups and different populations, but when looking for literature to support it, there are lack of research on the widespread use of art therapy with adolescents. At present, there is a lack of theoretical and practical guidance on painting art therapy for adolescents and young people, as well as a lack of operational systems that are suitable for widespread and daily use in teaching activities. Huang, (2021) At the same time, there is an even greater lack of relevant professional training for art teachers or psychology teachers. (Zhang,2018) As noted in a journal article noting that the effectiveness of art therapy may be influenced by the skill level and experience of the therapist Soape et al (2023), Therapists need to have not only specialized art skills but also an understanding of psychology to ensure that safe and effective therapy is provided within the art medium. These requirements are too high for regular teachers. Finally, lack of resources is also one of the challenges in implementing art therapy. Since art therapy usually requires some special art materials and professional staff, a school or organization may not be able to provide sufficient support due to financial reasons, thus limiting the promotion and implementation of art therapy. (Zhao, 2023)

The purpose of this article is to understand teachers' perceptions and practice recommendations for painting art therapy and to fill the knowledge gap in the existing literature about how painting art therapy is widely practiced with school-based adolescents in a wide school setting. The article also hopes to provide additional information to support educational and mental health professionals in their decision-making and intervention strategies when preventing mental health problems among adolescent students.

### **Research Question**

This article wishes to explore teachers' perceptions of the practice of painting art therapy and to provide positive suggestions for the future. Therefore, this paper utilized a qualitative approach to examine art teachers responsible for adolescents' (1) perceptions of art therapy and (2) challenges in their practice.

### **Method**

#### *Mandala Painting*

Mandala painting is a form of artistic expression derived from Hindu and Buddhist cultures and takes its name from the Sanskrit word "Mandala", meaning "circle" or "surround". Mandalas are geometric patterns, usually based on squares, which are formed by regular repetition in a radial pattern (Fontana, 2006). The process of creating a mandala painting can itself be seen as a meditative process, in which the artist achieves a meditative state by focusing on and repeatedly drawing symbols and patterns (Tucci, 2012). This art form combines elements of religion, philosophy, and art to provide the viewer with an experience of deep contemplation and transcendence of the material world (Henderson et al., 2007). Psychologist Carl Jung applied the art form of mandala painting to mind therapy theory. Jung

analyzed, generalized, and summarized the characteristics of mandala painting. Jung believed that the artistic characteristics of mandala paintings could be regarded as a kind of expression of human spiritual consciousness (Jung, 1973). Human consciousness can be expressed in concrete paintings through mandala paintings, supplemented with a variety of colors, lines, symbols, and so on, which are in the consciousness of the human being (Xie et al., 2018). In this article, the researcher used mandala paintings as the subject of the activity.

### **Research Design**

A qualitative research design is chosen as the methodology. Through qualitative research methods in-depth interviews from participant teachers. The purpose of this article was to understand the use of art therapy on adolescent students and teachers' perceptions of art therapy and to explore the implementation of art therapy in the classroom. This article did not alter the existing context affecting the art instruction already implemented in the school but reasonably investigated teachers' perceptions and the challenges they faced when teaching art therapy strategies. In this single case, the single-site strategy was a type of assessment used to carefully evaluate whether art teachers were involved in any particular way in implementing art therapy strategies, even though this was a small sample size. This approach allowed the researcher to scrutinize the purpose of this study in a place where art therapy had been carefully implemented, rather than in a larger place.

The participants were art teachers in a primary school in Xi'an, China. There are six art teachers in this primary school and the selection of participants was made among them. The participants were experienced art teachers. The researcher will first contact one art teacher at the school via phone and online communication application to inform them of the desire to conduct the study and ask the teacher to obtain the contact information of the school's leaders. After obtaining permission, the researcher selected the teachers to participate in the study according to strict sample criteria.

Three teachers were selected. Table 1 shows the demographics of these three teachers. These three participants could well understand the basic theories and principles of art therapy possess keen observational skills and be sensitive to students' emotions and needs. Ability to interpret students' artwork and understand students' emotions and experiences expressed through art. Also, for students, the researcher ensured that students volunteered to participate in the study, and students with an interest in art and some experience in painting were selected. This helps to ensure that they can engage more deeply in art therapy activities and provide more meaningful feedback.

Table 1

*The Demographics of the Participants*

Participant	Years of teaching	Educational level	Position
<b>A</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>Bachelor of design</b>	<b>Normal teacher</b>
<b>B</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>Bachelor of art</b>	<b>Normal teacher</b>
<b>C</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>Bachelor of education</b>	<b>Leader of the art teacher group</b>

This art therapy activity was conducted over five months, with painting art therapy activities taking place every two weeks, for a total of four times. Mandala painting was chosen for the art therapy activities. Table 2 explains the themes of the activities. Four painting themes were chosen for this study, which corresponded to the four components of children's self-strength, self-identity and development, emotional balance, and stages of selfhood.

Table 2

*Explanation of The Themes of Four Painting Activities*

Time	1	2	3	4
<b>Theme</b>	Spontaneous mandalas	Family mandalas	Emotional mandalas	Mandala with six colors
<b>Content</b>	Spontaneous mandalas are usually done without a predetermined structure or theme. This creation can help release anxiety, stress and achieve inner peace.	Family mandala is used to explore and express family relationships and dynamics. Some hidden psychological problems usually originate from the family of origin.	Express "happy" and "unhappy" moments in paintings. This helps students to better regulate their emotions and promotes mental health and emotional stability	Color has a powerful psychological and emotional impact. Different colors can evoke different emotions and mental states. Creating a color mandala is a free and relaxing creative activity.
<b>Module</b>	Self-strength	Self-identity and development	Emotional balance	Stages of selfhood

The process of painting art therapy activities is as follows. The art teacher utilizes 5 to 8 minutes to introduce the theme of the activity to the students. After that, the teacher plays soft music and instructs the students to properly take deep breaths and briefly meditate in their seats with closed eyes to relax and clutter their minds. Next, students can choose their drawing tools and create art for 30 minutes. Meditation is the process of calmly limiting attention and/or thought using a series of mental exercises (Curry & Kasser, 2005). These practices are thought to help self-regulate the body and mind, specifically mental health

issues. (Cahn & Polich, 2006). During the creation period, the teacher will not intervene or give any instructions, and the classroom will remain quiet. At the end of the creation, students volunteer to come up to the front of the class and share their paintings; the teacher will not force or name any students. At the end of each activity, the teacher will analyze and organize the painting following the judging criteria.

Before data analysis, the researcher (proficient in both English and Chinese Mandarin) translated the interview transcripts from Chinese (the language in which the interviews were conducted) to English. The risk that original meanings and interpretations might be lost or altered was noted from the participants' perspective (McKenna, 2022).

### **Data Collection**

To gain an in-depth understanding of art teachers' teaching practices and thinking processes, the researcher chose to conduct semi-structured face-to-face interviews. This method can provide in-depth information as well as give the interviewees enough space to express themselves freely.

Firstly, all the data received from the interview were organized and the data analysis was within the research concept. The researcher had found meaningful insights from the interview data analysis and the report was written based on the interview data collected. Second, the researcher monitored the art teachers' reflections and notes after each art activity. The reflections were about what went well and what needed to be adjusted in terms of lesson planning, appropriate materials or strategies used in the classroom, etc.

Before to designing the interview questions, the researcher clarified the overall objective of the study and the specific research questions. The specific research questions were used as the two main modules of the interviews, one on teachers' perceptions and the other on challenges faced by teachers. Before finalizing the interview questions, the researcher sought the advice of an adolescent counselor currently in Xi'an. Her advice ensured an effective design of the questions and a comprehensive coverage of the research topic.

The interview questions were divided into four sections; section A was the rapport question. section B explored teachers' knowledge and perceptions of painting art therapy. Section C was about challenges encountered in practice, and section D was an open-ended question that incorporated time for participating teachers to share freely.

### **Data Analysis**

After reviewing the literature on thematic analysis methods, the researcher used a six-step thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clark, 2006): (1) familiarize themselves with the textual and visual data from the interviews and the art teacher's reflections to jot down initial ideas; (2) code the textual dataset from the interviews to extract themes that could be integrated; (3) identify the themes and collect all data related to each potential theme and collect all data elements related to each potential theme, including words and phrases; (4) review the themes again; (5) confirm the final themes; and (6) write up the findings. All questions were audio-recorded, and no specific software was used for this study. Instead, Microsoft Word was used throughout the transcription process.

## Result

Following a thematic analysis of the textual data as a whole, the researcher was guided by the research questions for the following two thematic modules, i.e., (1) art teachers' perceptions of practicing painting art therapy extensively in the classroom setting and (2) difficulties and challenges faced by art teachers in the activity. These key themes are presented below.

### *The Perception of Art Teacher*

The participants were one male and two female teachers with an average of 5 years of teaching experience. The students taught by these selected participants were students with a high interest in art classes and strong drawing skills. The teachers' perception of art therapy emerged as a main theme for this study by analyzing questions one, two, three, four, and five in section B. Where participants shared their perception of art therapy according to their experience as a teacher, and their description of art therapy so far along their journey in the school. Participants A, B, and C all showed positive comments about the art therapy program. Participants A and B, in particular, directly described art therapy as "positive emotional guidance".

Participant A said that art therapy, as opposed to talking, was a "slow process of communication, a way of expressing oneself without becoming overly defensive". Participant B identified art therapy as "new things and new ideas" for "releasing stress," and she suggested a curiosity about art therapy that existed in both her and her students. She also found that students were "more willing to concentrate on the activities" and were "enthusiastic about participating in classroom activities." Participant B saw art therapy as an "opportunity for them to create their art independently and thoughtfully, as well as self-expression." Participant C, like B, also referred to "relieve stress" and felt that art therapy brought "inner peace" and that it was a "unique form of expression" that allowed students to "high level of concentration and remain quiet" and "really enjoy" the activity.

The feedback shared by these participants in terms of their perceptions of art therapy was all positive. Participant C shared her good and bad experiences when she was new to art therapy. She shared:

"This was the first time I practiced mandala painting art therapy activities in my classroom. At first, I was a bit worried about the students' reaction but soon realized that they enjoyed this novel way of expression."

Overall, it was a good experience. It was a positive perception towards the art therapy experience and journey they had been through.

### **The Challenge Faced by Art Teacher**

The challenge teachers faced when applying art therapy emerged as a thematic module for this study by analyzing questions one, two, three, and four in section C. From the responses collected to the interview questions, teachers encountered various challenges and difficulties based on their hierarchy level and gave many worthwhile and valuable suggestions.

When asked about the challenges encountered during art therapy practice, Participant A's talk focused more on students. He found that art therapy activities were heavily influenced by the students' upbringing, mood, and the weather at the time of the activity. These



unpredictable reasons were challenging for him to implement the activities. For Participants B and C, they were more concerned with changes in themselves as mentors.

“It is Challenging to be introduced to concepts related to psychology and art therapy from scratch and to apply them to the classroom in a short period.” (Participant B)

“Although I have rich experience in teaching art, I still lack professional knowledge and skills in psychology and art therapy.” (Participant C)

When talking about the difficulties faced in conducting art therapy activities, Participant A shared what happens in the classroom “There was a student who had been thinking for a long time about the subject matter of his painting and did not know how to express his inner mind.” Participant B, on the other hand, discovered through the activity the dilemma of popularizing mental health education. Participant B placed a great deal of importance on the mental state and mental health of adolescents, and she hoped that adolescent mental health could be discussed honestly in education processing instead of hiding it from the students for fear of rebellion. Not only that, but Participant B also felt that the thing that she found most difficult was balancing the paradox of adolescent mental health perceptions and needs. She said:

“The biggest challenge is to explain the meaning of art therapy to the students in more depth. Students themselves can face up to various psychological problems and pay attention to their mental health”.

Participant C described the difficulty of being an instructor. She felt that although she was an experienced art teacher, she still lacked knowledge and practical experience in art therapy and psychology. She said:

“Without a professional background in psychology, I sometimes feel unable to comprehensively deal with students' emotional and behavioral problems during the activities.”

### **Suggestions Given by Art Teachers**

During the open-ended question session, the participant teachers shared some positive suggestions with the researcher based on their experiences and insights. Participant B responded based on her concerns about the current state of mental health education that “I think the first and foremost thing to do is to popularize the concept of art therapy to students and parents.” She believes that the first step to conducting better activity is to create awareness and change the prejudices about adolescents' psychological problems. Honest discussion, not avoidance is needed. Finally, Participant C provided recommendations for the community and educational institutions. She said, “Schools or society should provide them with the necessary support and resources.” She also wanted more specialized support “I think schools can collaborate with professionals such as counselors and art therapists to implement art therapy activities.” Participant C also emphasized a point that “schools can collaborate with professionals such as counselors and art therapists to implement art therapy activities”

### **Discussion**

This article aimed to understand art teachers' perceptions of art therapy activities, to personally express during painting art therapy activities, and to identify supports and barriers



in planning and initiating activities. Firstly, in terms of teachers' perception, the participating teachers were able to demonstrate a positive attitude towards the painting art therapy activity and an understanding of the activity itself and its in-depth connotations. Participants have described painting art activities as "inner peace" "release stress" "positive emotional guidance" and "new things and new ideas". This positive feedback provides confidence for future research. In this study, the researcher found that the participating teachers had positive perceptions and evaluations of painting art therapy, that the teachers were able to successfully conduct painting art therapy activities, and that the students were able to accomplish the targeted tasks. These results suggest that painting art therapy as an art teaching tool is feasible in the school context while being accepted and encouraged. This confirms the research of some Chinese scholars on expressive arts therapy. Art therapy is a scientific means of psychoeducation. Teachers can change the fixed one-way teaching mode, set up an immersive art creation scene, and organize psychological curriculum activities full of practicality, interactivity, and fun (Shen, 2021). At the same time, this kind of activity can not only guide students to participate in psychological thematic activities in the form of art, guide students to reconstruct their experiences, debug their emotions, and solve their problems, but also enhance the relationship between the disciplinary art discipline and the psychological discipline (Zhang, et al., 2023). These positive implications can also demonstrate teachers' confidence in and recognition of art therapy.

Secondly, Participants raised many problems that arose during the activity in terms of time, student creativity, and teacher competence. Especially as instructors, they were deeply impressed with their unskilled knowledge and practice in psychology and art therapy. Further analysis showed that while teachers had positive attitudes towards art therapy activities, they also felt concerned and powerless about their lack of knowledge and experience in psychology and art therapy. Consistency exists between these findings and those of previous studies. Bi concluded in the study that having qualified painting counselors is key to conducting painting therapy in secondary schools (Bi, 2021). Counselors should have the basic counseling skills and literacy needed to conduct mental health education, and more importantly, they should have skills related to drawing psychotherapy, including professional training in drawing analysis, a keen sense of insight, and detailed observation, and thus be able to analyze students' inner worlds based on their artwork (Cheng, 2018). These conclusions coincide with the performance and feedback of the teachers in this study, further illustrating the importance of cultivating excellent teachers with comprehensive abilities in schools. In response to the challenges and difficulties faced that one participant in this study mentioned, the participant felt that there are still barriers to openly and honestly discussing art therapy and psychological issues with students. This is attributed to the masking of adolescent mental health issues and the fact that art therapy is not widely available in the field of mass education. These findings can be confirmed by the results of previous studies. In China, there are already some primary and secondary schools carrying out psychotherapeutically oriented art education activities, but they are limited to being used to help students with autism in the classroom, and the degree of popularization is low (Qian, 2006). Teachers should consciously use painting therapy in the daily routine of mental health education and extend the help to the whole class or even the whole school (Bi, 2021). This study has expanded the target to general students, but it still cannot change the limitation of the low popularity of painting art therapy. The participant teacher struggled to navigate through practical issues and needed more specialized support. This suggests that providing more in-depth and specialized

knowledge training as well as collaborative mentoring for school-based teachers is a priority for improving school-based art therapy activities in the future.

### **Significance**

Currently in China, the majority of art therapy research is directed at college students, and very little research has been conducted on primary and secondary school students, including psychological interventions for home-leaved children, which are theoretical narratives lacking rigorous design and municipal data, not to mention the lack of data on the wide range of art therapy activities conducted for adolescent students. In addition, there is a lack of professional training in art therapy, and art teachers or school psychologists should have the ability and experience to guide students to achieve psychological growth under the concept of 'art as therapy' (Zhang, 2018), This is also a bottleneck in the widespread promotion of art therapy in primary and secondary schools.

This article explored issues such as teachers' perceptions of painting art therapy activities in the classroom setting and the challenges that arise during practice, try to fill the gap in existing theories about the broad participation of adolescent students in painting art therapy. It also gives teachers a certain amount of experience and a reference for the direction of future training. The takeaway from this article is that educators can learn about the strengths and weaknesses of painting art therapy as it is practiced in the classroom setting based on student performance and teacher perceptions. Using art therapy as a widely used and beneficial educational tool rather than an obscure phrase that is foreign to everyone. Therefore, as an educator as well as a researcher, I would like to implement this concept in schools in China that lack art education and apply it in their daily teaching. Therefore, understanding teachers' perceptions of drawing art therapy will not only help the researcher to develop better and more relevant learning materials for art therapy in the 21st century, but will also allow them to gain more practical experience, and to improve and progress in practice.

### **Limitation**

This study focused on the experiences and perceptions of sixth-grade art teachers at a primary school in Xi'an, China, about the painting art therapy activities. By sharing their perspectives, data were collected only from teachers responsible for the sixth grade (age at the beginning of adolescence), while other grades were not surveyed. If teachers accountable for students throughout adolescence were to be surveyed, a broader study would need to be conducted in junior high school or senior high school, and then understanding the perceptions of teachers responsible for the entire adolescent stage on this issue would help understand the difficulties and successes associated with painting art therapy.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which were conducted individually with participants by appointment. This method helped researcher understand their perceptions of painting art therapy, their difficulties, and the positive insights they gained from participating in this study. However, the teachers' responses were subjective and characterized by certain personal biases. Their gender, teaching age, or professional background could influence their perceptions and judgments. In addition to this, this study only conducted four activities over a semester and chose a very limited number of topics. Therefore, the data conclusions only discuss the short-term effects of art therapy activities on adolescent students, and there is a lack of follow-up on the long-term effects to determine if

these changes are lasting. Finally, based on the teachers' responses, it was found that it was more urgent to conduct painting art therapy activities within 45 minutes of standard classroom time. Pre-creation instruction time and meditation time shorten the free creation time and also affect the final sharing and presentation session.

### **Conclusion**

The main aim of this article is to explore the perceptions and recommendations of art teachers regarding the implementation of art therapy activities in schools for young students. Their feedback and sharing of experiences broadened my perspective as a researcher, enabling me to learn more about teachers' perceptions of art therapy and suggest better solutions to ensure that all teachers understand the benefits and appeal of collaborative teaching.

Based on the data extracted from the interviews, all three teachers had very positive and encouraging views of art therapy. They shared unreservedly the challenges and difficulties encountered in their practice and shared many short stories and feelings. At the end of the interviews, the participating teachers gave positive suggestions on how art therapy can be more smoothly and widely practiced in schools, the importance of popularizing the concept of art therapy, and the importance of providing more opportunities for professional development and training for teachers in society.

Having said that, based on the study being conducted, there are a few implications for future research studies. It seems that there is a knowledge gap in the literature and the practical application of painting art therapy. In future studies of painting art therapy in school, consideration could be given to expanding the activities to junior or senior high schools to include more schools, grades, and teachers to increase the representativeness and credibility of the study. In addition to this, more flexible scheduling of activities is also necessary, and future studies could be scheduled to follow the formal art therapy process more closely and not be limited to one class period, but rather combine two classes or utilize other out-of-school time to do so more effectively.

### **Acknowledgements**

The input from my M.Ed. period supervisor Dr. Nur Aimi Nasuha Binti Burhanuddin at University Putra Malaysia, alongside her constant support and feedback throughout the research process was invaluable. In addition, this study would not have been possible without the participation of the participant teachers. (pseudonymized in this study)

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

There was no funding for this study.

## References

- Bi, Y. L., Li, J. D. (2021). Study on the application of painting therapy in Mental Health Education in middle schools. *Education Study*, 3(2), 168–173. <https://doi.org/10.35534/es.0302027>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Cahn, B. R., & Polich, J. (2006). Meditation states and traits: EEG, ERP, and neuroimaging studies. *Psychological Bulletin*, 132(2), 180–211. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.132.2.180>
- Curry, N. A., & Kasser, T. (2005). Can coloring mandalas reduce anxiety? *Art Therapy*, 22(2), 81–85. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07421656.2005.10129441>
- Cheng, P. P., (2018) Research on the application of drawing therapy in the intervention of children with intellectual disabilities. *Journal of Zhao Tong College*, 40(3):121-124.
- Eisner, E. W. (1978). What Do Children Learn When They Paint? *Art Education*, 31(3), 6–11. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043125.1978.11651918>
- Fontana, D. (2006). *Meditating with mandalas: 52 new mandalas to help you grow in peace and Awareness*. London, England: Duncan Baird.
- Gersch, I., & Sao Joao Goncalves, S. (2006). Creative arts therapies and educational psychology: Let's get together. *International Journal of Art Therapy*, 11(1), 22–32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17454830600674050>
- Heenan, D. (2006). Art as therapy: An effective way of promoting positive mental health? *Disability & Society*, 21(2), 179–191. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687590500498143>
- Henderson, P., Rosen, D., & Mascaro, N. (2007). Empirical study on the healing nature of mandalas. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, 1(3), 148–154. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1931-3896.1.3.148>
- Huang, K. Y. (2021). Toward an indigenization process: Art therapy practice in the Chinese cultural context. *Art Therapy*, 39(1), 5–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07421656.2021.1919007>
- Jung, C. G. (1973). *Mandala symbolism*. Princeton University Press.
- Karkou, V., & Glasman, J. (2004). Arts, education, and society: the role of the arts in promoting the emotional well-being and social inclusion of young people. *Support for Learning*, 19(2), 57–65. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0268-2141.2004.00321.x>
- Kearns, D. (2004). Art therapy with a child experiencing sensory integration difficulty. *Art Therapy*, 21(2), 95–101. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07421656.2004.10129551>
- Malchiodi, C. A. (2012). *Handbook of art therapy*. Guilford Press.
- Marshall M. C. (2003). Creative learning: the mandala as teaching exercise. *The Journal of Nursing Education*, 42(11), 517–519. <https://doi.org/10.3928/0148-4834-20031101-10>
- McKenna, L. (2022). Translation of research interviews: Do we have a problem with qualitative rigor? *Nurse Author and Editor*, 32(1), 1–3. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nae2.31>
- Qian, C., X. (2006). Foreign psychotherapeutic orientation of primary and secondary art education and its revelation. *Foreign Primary and Secondary Education*, (7):44-46.
- Robinson, A. H. (2013). Arts Integration and the Success of Disadvantaged Students: A Research Evaluation. *Arts Education Policy Review*, 114(4), 191–204. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10632913.2013.826050>
- Soape, E., Barlow, C., Torrech Pérez, M., Hart, M., Gussak, D. E., Schubarth, A., & Sumner, C. (2023). Art therapy in prisons program exhibition: Implementation and benefits. *Art Therapy*, 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07421656.2023.2202286>

- Shen, P. Q., Duan, L. L., Zhu, D. (2021) A Feasibility Analysis of the Use of Expressive Arts in the Mental Health Curriculum. *Psychologies*, 16(6): 222  
<https://doi.org/10.19738/j.cnki.psy.2021.06.109>
- Tucci, G. (2012). *The Theory and Practice of The Mandala*. Courier Corporation.
- Wu. B. S., Niu, H.X. (2014). A Comparative Analytical Study of Chinese and Foreign Concepts of art Education. *Art and Fashion*,10, 314.  
<http://www.cqvip.com/qk/89790x/201410/662983896.html>
- Xie, P., Zhang, Y., Wang, Y. (2018). Application of Mandala Drawing Therapy in Recovering Schizophrenia Patients. *Ningxia Medical Journal*, 40(12):1189-1190
- Zhao, Q. (2023). Research on the application of “New role of art healing” in children’s art teaching—taking the course design of three-dimensional manual teaching as an example. *Advances in Education*, 13(03), 1011–1015. <https://doi.org/10.12677/ae.2023.133160>
- Zhang, X. Y. (2018). A review of expressive arts therapy research. *Shanghai Educational Research*, (2), 78-81.
- Zhang, L., Liu, Y., Tian, Q., Liang, H. Y., (2023) An Exploration of the Use of Expressive Arts Therapy in Mental Health Education Curriculum Reform. *Frontier of higher education*,6(11), 216-217.