

ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

Art therapy in Polish conditions - the beginning of wider usage

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In Poland, art therapy is not treated as an official occupation. In the list of professions announced by The Ministry of Labour and Social Policy we will not find this designation: art therapist. However, more and more institutions are becoming aware of the importance of art therapy and the possibilities of using it in many fields.

How did it start?

Art therapy appeared in Poland several years ago, mostly in the field of care in relation to the mentally handicapped and physically ill people – in hospitals, social care institutions and other settings. Working with different clients using the tools of art was sometimes called culture therapy; also terms like therapy by visual art or artotherapy (Szulc, 2011)¹ were used. One of the people who have made a big contribution to the introduction of art therapy in Poland is Professor WitaSzulc. She has published many valuable articles and books, in which she presents culture therapy and art therapy. She also compared art therapy, as an academic discipline in Europe, with the system in Poland and this was a really useful source of information, especially for Polish people

¹W. Szulc, Arteterapia. Narodziny idei, ewolucja teorii, rozwój praktyki, Difin SA, Warszawa 2011 (p. 19-59)

who are interested in this profession – a profession still developing in our country (Szulc, 2010)².

Professor Szulc was a pioneer in that she demonstrated the value of art used therapeutically and she showed how the needs of different clients could be approached. Firstly, she was trying to give the name 'culture therapy' life. The aim of culture therapy was to use tools based on various fields of culture and to popularize cultural activities among sick people, which have an influence on the patient during his or her stay in hospital, during illness and therapy. Professor Szulc, in her publications, mentioned cultural activities based on a theory of upbringing through art, theories of free time and recreation, and also the definition of health (Szulc, 2011).³ Later, the author noticed that this notion of culture therapy had problems with becoming more popular so it was changed into art therapy.

In the late 1980s and 1990s publications like books and magazines appeared in a larger number on the market. Polish scientists, representing humanistic studies and doctors of medicine, pointed to the need of introducing art therapy to different client groups, including using art therapy with patients in mental health settings.

It is interesting that in Poland there has been a strong tendency to combine different disciplines of art and culture together in art therapy. This attitude provokes strong discussions in some environments, for example, visual artists working in the field of art therapy are against treating completely different forms of art equally. Wide and narrow definitions of art therapy currently exist in Poland. Wider definitions mention not only therapy by visual arts, but also other types of art like drama, music, dance etc. In a narrower version art therapy is understood as a way of providing help in therapy and treatment, using visual arts as therapeutic tools.

Nowadays, in Poland, art therapy is in use not only while working with sick or disabled people. Now art therapy is used in many aspects in social care, education, occupational

² W. Szulc, Arteterapia jako dyscyplina akademicka w krajach europejskich, Oficyna Wydawnicza ATUT – Wrocławskie Wydawnictwo Oświatowe, Wrocław 2010(p. 9-71)

³ W. Szulc, Arteterapia. Narodziny idei, ewolucja teorii, rozwój praktyki, Difin SA, Warszawa 2011 (p. 13-56).

therapy, at special schools⁴, hospitals, treatment of elderly clients, mentally handicapped and many others like cancer treatment – but rather as an additional therapy, not an independent one. Probably, because it still does not have necessary regulations, necessary mostly to be treated as an equal source of help besides other therapies and medical cure. Hard work is also done by teachers and lecturers who work with children of special needs and who have observed the therapeutic values of using art in everyday work.

Organizations

The lack of regulations has resulted in the desire to start a more professional way of using art therapy. If something is not official in Poland, some institutions do not treat it as an important source of help or support. For example, art therapy activities provided at school or in other places are usually not paid ones, because there are no funds for them, as art therapists are not mentioned in state regulations. Introducing art therapy as an official branch of multi-disciplinary assistance could help to increase the understanding of it. In institutions like schools very often it is voluntary or additional work done by passionate people, who are willing to help others and share their experience (like most of my own work in this field).

Increased interest in art therapy has been noticed since the late 1990s. The first association of art therapists called Kajros was established in the early 2000s and under detailed requirements offers certificates in two fields: school art therapists and educator of art therapy⁵. Since establishing the first organization, other associations which offer training, information about Polish and international conferences and exchanging experience, have appeared in recent years.

⁴ In Poland special schools are organized for strongly disabled children who are taught there some basic subjects, including art and how to deal with an everyday life.

⁵ More information can be found at <http://www.kajros.pl/>

One of the most important and creative organization is The Association of Psychiatry and Art, which I am a member of. This is a non-profit organization run by Doctor Andrzej Kowal, a doctor of psychiatry and a long-time director of a psychiatric hospital along with Professor Grażyna Borowik, a professor of fine arts from The Pedagogy University in Krakow, Art Institute. The association at its annual international conference mostly concentrates on demonstrating the great artistic potential of handicapped people with various disorders, including intellectual impairments. The association organizes that conference, where using visual arts in work with different groups of clients and the phenomena of their art, is shown by participants from Poland and other countries during lectures and exhibitions. The association also pays attention to introducing art therapy to environments such as hospitals, social care, education etc.⁶

Ways of introducing art therapy to visual arts students and teachers who work with children of special needs

In my working environment, art therapy is introduced to visual arts students to show them how to use their artistic skills in their future career. Art therapy is also presented during workshops organized by me for special needs children and handicapped people. Also, basic art therapy is to be shortly introduced to art education students studying Art education methodology and it is included in lectures on art education for pre-school and primary education students. The steps which are being taken should help them to understand the main points of art therapy and encourage students to start or broaden their education in this field, especially because of the fact that they will meet special needs children at schools in their future careers.

Now in Poland there is a really positive tendency to educate ill or handicapped children together in the classes for all students. This situation evokes the need to extend teachers' qualifications and enable them to work in such classes, where a lot of more additional competences should be possessed to deal with serious cases like students'

⁶More information can be found at <http://psychiatriaisztuka.pl>

long-term illnesses or disorders. Elements of art therapy can be welcomed while working with children of learning disabilities and with health problems.

Art therapy in the academic field

There are some higher schools at master degree or bachelor level in Poland, which offer studies of art therapy. In some universities or state higher vocational schools academic studies dealing with art therapy have been introduced in recent years. In Poland, universities are independent and they draw up their own curricula according to the law and with the margin based on the experience and scientific approach of their academic staff.

Art therapy postgraduate studies have been also established at my institution, as 4-term studies for Bachelor or Master Degree graduates. They are dedicated mostly to teachers who work with children of special needs, although people with artistic skills interested in the therapeutic power of art are also welcomed. The studies called Art therapy in psychological and pedagogical assistance contains a few modules of different subjects: specialization subjects, subjects of providing psychological and pedagogical assistance (e.g. Work with students of special needs, Diagnosis of a student with behavioural disorders, Diagnosis and work with an ADHD child, Work with a child with sight dysfunctions, Work with a child with hearing dysfunctions or subjects providing art therapy activities. The programme also contains training in chosen institutions. This is the sample programme, which shows that there is a different approach to the clients' problems and needs. In addition, to show that Poland is changing its stand, there are a lot of state and private institutions which provide courses of art therapy and training, offering short and long courses.

Introducing art therapy to Polish schools

The programme of post graduate studies presented briefly above was specially prepared to help teachers to work with children of special needs in compulsory schools.

In Polish state schools there is a place for all children, including children with serious health problems, long-term illnesses, intellectual disorders (on a level of disorder allowing a child to take part in a school life on a basic level), integrative classes for both disabled and healthy children are being opened as well. Children who suffer from a really serious illness or developmental disorder can be taught at home at the time when their health deteriorates or they are taught in special schools.

Nowadays, as I said before, in Poland all schools are obliged to provide children in need with assistance. The Polish Ministry of Education has distinguished eleven groups of students who seek this kind of assistance. Among them children with learning problems, with social problems, the handicapped and even talented children can be found. The document that was published does not mention art therapy among methods of assistance for students, but – what is really important – it is not against it. The regulation enumerates people and methods of work with children of special needs like: psychologists, pedagogy and social therapists, but also mentions that *other* methods of therapy can be used in providing assistance. This gives hope that the time has come to introduce art therapy to schools and encourage teachers to learn this subject.

Workshops for teachers and students

A good way to demonstrate the value of art therapy in work with school children is to organize workshops for teachers and students. Using art in a therapeutic way can be very advantageous for both students and teachers. Polish authors stress that art therapy has many functions, but based on my experience gained during more than twenty years of teaching and also working with children with problems like Down syndrome, hearing and sight problems, children who suffer from cognitive diseases and somatic illnesses, I would like to point out that some of the functions are really welcomed at school. The compensative, relaxing and educational functions of art therapy can be very profitable at the school environment. These three functions may be widely used while working with school children of special needs, but also with teenagers and other students. Art therapy gives the chance to calm down, to express feelings, to

work on a problem and find a solution to it. Of course, this is only a short view of the value of art therapy in a school, state or private.

Some teachers understand the power and need of art therapy. They attend offered studies, workshops and conferences, where they have a possibility to learn more about the problem. Sometimes different proposals, like relaxing activities for a hectic class of 6-7 years old pupils, for teenagers or for pre-school children, are prepared by me and my Art education students. Having experience as a long-term teacher and lecturer, these activities are organized to show that elements of art therapy can be used by teachers during their regular, everyday school work.

Working with the handicapped

People who suffer from intellectual disorders are often very talented. Although the level of artistic works does not matter in art therapy, being a PhD in artistic field, I find it difficult not to notice that some works of art by mentally ill people are impressive and astonishing. Among the handicapped we will find clients with mental retardation, physical moving problems after paralyzes or strokes, people with disorders like Down Syndrome and also people who suffer from illnesses like schizophrenia, depressions and many others. In Poland there are some types of places that provide assistance for such people. There are state and private daily care centres, houses of social help where daily and permanent care is offered. There are also psychiatric hospitals providing temporary and permanent assistance. These institutions have started using the therapeutic role of art and try to organize different artistic activities. Some places are very modern, where clients are offered a wide range of professional assistance and where art therapy is one of the most profitable sources of help.

My own experience is based on working with people from a daily care house in Malopolska region, where I live and work. The workshops for the clients have been run there by me and I have observed their inner ability of creation and deep understanding of the given problem; even when their health condition was sometimes very serious. Some of those people were not able to communicate verbally and art became a way of

expressing their deep feelings and problems. The most amazing works have been published in special publications, which showed the cooperation between my students and disabled people on proposed themes. The books: *Inside* and *The Man* (Bugajska-Bigos, 2011, 2012), published by my institution were a great success which helped to show the uniqueness of the inside and art of the handicapped people with whom we worked.

In 2013 I have been working with the clients from a different place called Occupational Therapy Workshops in NowySacz. This is a state form of organized assistance benefiting from public financing, where people are given the chance not only to spend their free time, but mostly they are offered activities which should help them to exist better in the society and ought to be helpful for their future lives. The Workshops are organized for young adults where they try to gain some basic knowledge and skills helpful in finding a job, depending on the level of their health condition.

Art therapy has been introduced in this place during visits. However, they have very specialized activities from different fields of life like: artistic, technical, cooking workshops and other. While working together we have been concentrating on helping them to express their emotions (some of the people suffer from autism), and to start to believe in their own possibilities and skills. The clients from The Workshops willingly take part in group activities and meeting them became a real pleasure and honour. They are visited by my students who would like to work in the field of art therapy in the future. We have been engaged in a new project: *Love*, which connects Polish and Slovakian students with clients from the Workshops. The *Love* publication has just been published and showed to the public (done in cooperation with Dr. Janka Satkova and her students from Constantine the Philosopher University, Nitra, Slovakia).

The last point of introducing art therapy in Poland that I would like to focus on is the project: Introducing art therapy in academic environment, schools and care over the handicapped, which have been planned for 2013 and 2014. The aim of the project is to show the importance of art therapy in the above-mentioned environments, which, I do hope, should be a little step taken in Malopolska region. The results of the research are going to be published.

To sum up:

- The term “art therapy” in Poland has a wider meaning. It is seen as a form of multi-aspect assistance, and there are no serious divisions between its types as, for example, in England. Art therapy is often presented alongside other therapies and it can include some elements of music, drama, book therapy and many more.
- The process of creating art therapy as an academic field has started.
- Some steps have been taken to legislate art therapy as an occupation.
- There are many institutions that deeply understand the role of art therapy in the complex assistance needed for different clients.
- The associations of art therapy have been established in recent years.
- Art therapy is being introduced to Polish schools, especially while working with children of special needs.
- There are a lot of state and private institutions that provide art therapy courses and training, offering short and long forms.
- In Poland art therapy is in use not only while working with sick or disabled people, hard work is done by teachers and lecturers who work with children of special needs, who have observed the therapeutic value of using art in everyday work with people.
- Lots of effort must be taken in Poland to use art therapy officially, but it will be extremely important to keep our national approach to it.

This article shows only examples of understanding and using art therapy in Poland, the presentation is based on my own experience and things which have been done to promote this field - art therapy in selected environments. What can be regarded as really important is that many working groups and places have noticed profits of using art therapy in certain situations and circumstances. Now Polish art therapy needs more

attention from the authorities in order to develop and be used everywhere where it is welcomed.

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Web pages:

<http://www.kajros.pl/>

<http://psychiatriaisztuka.pl>

