Iris Shakarov, Dafna Regev, Sharon Snir, Hod Orkibi & Michal Adoni-Kroyanker

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# Helpful and Hindering Events in Art Therapy as perceived by Art Therapists in the Educational System

In some countries today, the vast majority of pupils who receive therapy do so exclusively within the educational system (Farmer, Burns, Phillips, Angold & Costello, 2003; Rones & Hogwood, 2000). However, the relationship between the educational framework and the therapeutic field is complex and has many challenges, as well as advantages (Gonzalez-Dolginko, 2018; Snir et al., 2017).

A recent comprehensive study conducted in Israel examined how art therapy is applied in schools under the auspices of the Ministry of Education by asking art therapists (Regev, Green-Orlovich & Snir, 2015), educators (Keinan, Snir & Regev, 2016), supervisors (Belity, Regev & Snir, 2016), counselors and principals (Snir et al., 2017) to express their opinions and discuss their experiences on the employment and integration of art therapists in the school system, and the role of art therapy in schools in terms of its goals, advantages, difficulties, needs and future implications. The study indicated three main advantages of integrating art therapy into school settings: (1) Work within the school system enables systematic collaboration with the educational staff, (2) School-based therapy is available, accessible and less stigmatized than therapy provided by mental health services or in private settings, (3) The multi-disciplinary team serves as a source of emotional and professional support for therapists working within the system. The four main shortcomings were: (1) Unfavorable physical conditions, such as unsuitable therapy rooms or the lack of equipment and storage space, (2) Difficulties in

maintaining the client's privacy and providing a safe therapeutic space within the school setting, (3) Interference in the continuity of the therapeutic process from school holidays and events, (4) Tensions caused by the inherent differences between therapeutic and educational approaches.

Recent studies have stressed the value of integrating art therapy into the educational system (Deboys, Holtum & Wright, 2017; McDonald & Drey, 2017). Thus, to contribute to the development and consolidation of the field, the present study asked art therapists to identify and comment on significant helpful or hindering events, they felt had the greatest impact on the therapeutic process as it unfolds in school settings.

An examination of specific moments in the therapeutic process which are perceived as significant events by the client and/or the therapist can shed light on the management of the therapeutic process (Morgan & Cooper, 2015; Watson, Cooper, McArthur & McLeod, 2012). Studies have found that events that were perceived as helpful by clients were more effective in predicting the outcome of the therapeutic process and provided more detailed information about the therapeutic process than the therapist's initial intentions (Quick, Dowd, & Spong, 2017).

One of the main assessment instruments developed for this purpose is the Helpful Aspects of Therapy (HAT) questionnaire, which is used to identify and describe the most helpful event and other significant events in a given therapy session (Azoulay & Orkibi, 2018; Llewelyn, 1988). Most studies that have made use of this questionnaire have focused on the client's point of view and differentiated between different types of events based on the level of their therapeutic contribution by describing the processes that led to this contribution. Over the years, several researchers (Elliott, 1985; Timulak, 2007; Quick

et al., 2017) have examined significant events and identified nine categories which are perceived as helpful to clients: Awareness/ insight/ self-understanding, Behavioral change/problem solution, Empowerment, Relief, Exploring feelings/emotional experiencing, Reassurance/support/safety, Client involvement, Feeling understood, Personal contact.

A review of these findings indicates that the events that were reported as helpful to clients were those which were perceived as contributing to the therapeutic relationship or to outcomes within an individual therapeutic session. By contrast, the events that were perceived by clients as hindering the therapeutic process were associated with a sense of disappointment with the therapist or the therapeutic process. In addition, there was a substantial difference between what the clients and the therapists perceived to be significant events. Clients tended to mention emotional factors and aspects associated with the therapeutic relationship, whereas the therapists referred to cognitive features of therapy, such as insight or interpretation (Timulak, 2010).

At the time this study was written, all studies on this topic have dealt with adults. To the best of our knowledge there are no studies addressing significant events in the treatment of children or teens in general, and in particular in art therapy in the education system. Since this is a preliminary study in the field, and to reduce our intervention in the therapeutic process with the children, in the current study, the HAT questionnaire was completed by the art therapists to identify factors that either contribute or hinder the effectiveness of the therapeutic process in the school environment.

## Method

### Participants

Sixteen female art therapists participated in this study, all employed in elementary schools regulated by the Israeli education system. The therapists ranged in age from 36-51 ($M$ = 43). Eight had between 5-10 years of experience, three therapists had less than five years of experience, and five therapists had over ten years of experience (Table 1). Their clients either received special education services within the regular education system or were in special education classes in the regular education system. They did not receive any other form of therapy. The sixteen clients selected by these therapists were in grades three to six, and ranged in age from 8-13 ($M$=10) ten of whom were boys. All were born in Israel; 14 were defined as middle class, one was defined as upper class and one was from a lower-class family. Fifteen were Jewish and one was Muslim. Seven were diagnosed with ADHD and/or learning disabilities, two as having psychiatric disorders, two were diagnosed with ASD, and the remainder were described as coping with emotional/social/behavioral/language difficulties. Nine of the clients received individual sessions (I.S.), and seven received group sessions (G.S.).

**Instruments**

**Helpful Aspects of Therapy (HAT) questionnaire (Llewelyn, 1988).** We used the Hebrew version of the Llewelyn self-report questionnaire that addresses helpful and hindering events in the therapeutic session that had just been terminated (Sharon, 2014). The questionnaire was originally composed of four questions: (a) Identify the event that you perceived to be the most helpful or important during the session, (b) What do you believe made the event helpful or important, (c) rate the importance of the event on a scale from zero (not helpful) to nine (helpful), (d) Identify an event that you perceived to be hindering during the session and rank its intensity on the corresponding scale. Since

studies have suggested that the school environment is often perceived as contributing or impeding the therapeutic process (Regev et al., 2015), an open-ended question was added on the impact of the school system on therapy: "Please recount any event that occurred outside therapy within the context of the school where the therapy is offered which you feel was significantly helpful or hindering."

**Procedure**

The Ministry of Education was contacted for approval, and calls for therapists to participate were disseminated through the Israeli Association of Creative & Expressive Therapies (Yahat). In return for their participation, the therapists could enroll in a 60-hour course on Art Therapy Research which was held during the summer of 2015 and again in the 2015-2016 school year. The course was facilitated by two of the authors and was acknowledged as additional training hours by the therapists' workplaces. Each therapist selected a specific pupil in Grades 3-7 whom they were to treat at the start of the academic year and obtained informed consent from the parents of the child for participation. Each week during the 2015-2016 school year immediately after the therapeutic session with the client, the therapists filled out the HAT online questionnaire on an electronic form using Qualtrics software. The data were stored anonymously in a database that incorporated all responses of all participants and was saved on an Internet storage server. Over the course of the study, the rights and privacy of the participants were protected. This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social Welfare and Health Sciences of the University of Haifa and the Chief Scientist of the Ministry of Education.

**Data Analysis**

We chose one of the several approaches that are customarily used to analyze the data from the HAT questionnaires (Richards & Timulak, 2012): an open-ended qualitative analysis based on a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method is designed to create a classification of events derived from the data (see for example: Timulak & Lietaer, 2001) rather than using a pre-established taxonomy (see for example: Llewlyn, 1988), which enabled us to relate to the data without a-priori assumptions and pinpoint the helpful and hindering factors in this specific context. The research team relied on consensus to construct their interpretation of the data, so as to reduce individual biases as much as possible (Hill, Knox & Hess, 2012). The analysis followed the six-phase process for systematically identifying pattering across the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the first three stages: familiarization with the data, coding, and then the identification of emergent themes, fifteen forms (completed by three different therapists) were analyzed separately by three of the authors (two art therapy students, one of whom is the main author, and the third an art therapist and an experienced researcher) to obtain different perspectives on the categories that emerged from the data. Key concepts were defined separately according to the therapists' own terminology by each researcher (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In the fourth and fifth stages, all the researchers reviewed the themes and defined and assigned labels to each (Hill, Knox, & Hess, 2012) and the fourth researcher, who served as the auditor, discussed the significance of the data with the other researchers until agreement was reached regarding the categories and themes. Connections between themes were defined and the main themes, as well as the rules of inclusion for each theme, were formulated. Relevant feedback from the auditor was then discussed by the researchers and incorporated into the final coding grid. Then all 306

forms were analyzed according to the coding grid by the main author. Any reference in the questionnaires that corresponded to multiple coding categories was recorded in all of the appropriate categories. During this process, each piece of data that appeared in the forms was assigned to a category. For cases where data did not fit into one of the defined categories or themes, the main researcher proposed a change in the structure of the coding grid and coded it accordingly. Before the last stage of the data analysis when a full report was generated, all the questionnaires were reviewed once again to ensure that they had been thoroughly analyzed. This process was followed by a meeting of all four researchers. Finally, for the presentation of the findings, the instances of each category in the coding table were tabulated.

## Findings

In this section, the findings are presented as five main categories that reflect the significant events reported by the therapists during the 306 sessions (181 individual sessions - I.S. and 125 group sessions - G.S.) that took place during the 2015-2016 school year. Of the 452 events there were 419 helpful events and 33 hindering events. Tables 2 and 3 present the division of helpful and hindering events into categories and themes.

### Events Originating from the Therapist

A total of 173 helpful events (124 from I.S. and 49 from G.S.), and nine hindering events (2 from I.S. and 6 from G.S.) were reported.

#### Helpful events originating from the therapist.

***An empathic connection, responsiveness and attunement to the client's experience and needs in the here and now.*** One central theme that emerged from the data (63/173 events) derived from events in which the therapist created an atmosphere of

*unconditional positive regard* (Rogers, 1951). The therapists felt that events which were based on attunement and adaptation to the client's mood, as well as showing flexibility and attentiveness to their needs, made a significant contribution to the therapeutic process, and in particular to establishing a sense of security and trust in the relationship: "The fact that I let her take a piece of artwork out of the room gave her the feeling that I was attentive to her requests and was willing to take a step in her direction" (I.S., February 22). Events during which the therapist participated in the experience were also included, such as when the therapist joined the client in a shared experience of art making or playing a game: "By participating in the balloon painting, I responded to the client's need to establish trust between us. He got the feeling that he was not alone" (I.S., November 1). There were also events in which the therapist gave reinforcement or compliments and expressed admiration or appreciation of the client: "My encouragement and enthusiasm for his ideas empowered him " (G.S., March 31).

***Using processes that promote insight - mirroring and interpretation.*** An additional theme that emerged from the data (15/173 events) derived from events in which the therapist made use of mirroring and interpretation. These two processes are designed to advance clients' understanding to help them identify unconscious thoughts and stances that make it difficult for them to cope and adapt, name different emotions and feelings, and give inner meaning and perspective to events: "When I reflected on the way he communicates and interacts at the peak stage of the game, while he was passionate about himself and free to listen and learn, it was a significant moment" (G.S., December 31). Another therapist offered a useful interpretation: "I found it helpful when he spoke about his Minecraft world in a way that expressed what happened today in reality. I told

him that it must be very difficult to live in a world where you cannot trust anyone, and you are constantly forced to stand guard and attack others" (G.S., May 18).

***How the therapist engages herself - self-disclosure, modeling and counter-transference.*** This theme (14/173 events) describes events in which the therapist drew on her own personality, emotions, and subjective characteristics in therapy. Some of the reported events included self-disclosure: "I spoke about my own difficulty when it was clear that the client was also coping with difficulties... Perhaps it will elicit awareness..." (I.S., November 11). Other events described the use of modeling: "Verbalizing my own feelings opened a window to the client's feelings..." (I.S., December 31). In addition, the therapists reported events during which there was a conscious use of their countertransference: "Thinking about her between sessions and realizing I can identify with her detachment allows me to break through and initiate more physical closeness to her, while taking a closer look at her artwork..." (G.S., March 9).

***Structuring the therapeutic framework.*** This theme included events that concerned the therapeutic framework, which included the definition of the therapeutic relationship in terms of time (maintaining timetables and scheduling the sessions), the location of the session, the rules of conduct and the therapeutic contract, and the goals of the therapeutic process if they existed at this stage of therapy (23/173 events). Some of the helpful events described by the therapists addressed issues of maintaining the continuity of the sessions: "Taking his previous artwork out of the closet and looking at it retrospectively created a feeling of continuation that helped the client engage in therapy after a long break" (I.S., May 8).

Similarly, cases in which the therapist set limits for the client or strictly maintained the therapeutic framework were viewed as helpful (11/173 events): "My insistence on a certain rule led to an emotional response. Things surfaced and were verbally addressed, which led to a conversation. At the end of the session she walked out with a smile, despite the difficulty" (I.S., January 14). In some cases, the therapists reported situations in which the client attempted to inquire about facets of the therapeutic contract and mentioned that this was helpful and eventually led to a strengthening of the trust and confidence in their relationship: "A helpful event occurred when she asked me if the things that she was telling me were going to be relayed to someone else. I think she was testing how much she could really open up and trust me" (I.S., March 3).

However, in some cases events in which the therapist decided to break out of the boundaries of the therapeutic framework were also perceived as helpful. One such instance was when one of the therapists decided to leave the therapy room [with the client]: "Outside, new things were possible, then back inside, she started creating again... I believe that the (change of) setting helped her remain calm and tranquil" (I.S., March 17). In other cases, deviations from the therapeutic framework that were perceived as helpful were made in response to unexpected circumstances or constraints. In one case, one of the therapists decided to include the clients' mother in the session, since she was already visiting the school: "The client enjoyed his mother's attention... her love and her concern for him" (I.S., March 9).

***Using play during the therapeutic session.*** This theme included events in which the helpful aspects were connected to the use of play as an additional therapeutic intervention during the session (18/173 events). In many cases, joint play was perceived

by the therapists as a helpful way to strengthen the client's sense of competence and self-worth, as an opportunity for the client to learn about him/herself, as an opportunity for the therapist to become acquainted with other sides of the client, and as a means of expressing complex content in an indirect manner: "The game of throwing a ball enabled verbal sharing and the release of complex content in a symbolic manner" (I.S., January 31). In one case, the therapist described how the use of a game that she invented, in which the participants were encouraged to share something about themselves depending on the words written on colored slips pulled from a pile, encouraged the client to engage in sharing: "When she pulled out a slip that read 'Friend' she was happy and it allowed her to share. I felt that something had broken loose inside of her" (I.S., February 11).

***Conversation about the nature of therapy.*** This theme addressed helpful events in which the participants had an open discussion about the essence of the therapeutic process and the therapeutic relationship (8/173 events). In certain cases, the conversation was initiated by the therapist to coordinate expectations and to provide or clarify the goals of the therapeutic process: "I communicated to him that here he can talk about his fears, and that an attempt will be made to help him cope with them" (I.S., November 5).

***Providing information*.** In a number of cases (7/173 events), the therapists related to events in which they offered guidance, or psycho-educational explanations, or general guidelines to serve as helpful supports during therapy: "He used my suggestion to alter his way of thinking and succeeded, there was something there beyond that specific event, this is a technique that he can use in a variety of situations" (I.S., December 21).

***Offering technical assistance***. In a small number of cases (5/173 events), the therapists referred to situations in which they offered the client technical assistance

during the creative process as significant events contributing to the client and advancing the therapeutic relationship: "My active accompaniment of him in the creative process, by assisting him in preparing the complex parts, contributed to the changes in his normal conduct. He referred to this and expressed his gratitude" (I.S., November 25).

***A focus on processing the termination of therapy.*** This theme dealt with useful events that relate to the last phase of therapy, preparing for its termination (8/173 events). At times, preparing for termination of therapy was perceived by the therapists as providing the client an opportunity to process the meaning of therapy and the therapeutic relationship up to that point: "I pointed out to her that we will have only four more sessions. The client asked if we would continue to meet next year... She began to realize what the sessions meant to her" (I.S., April 7). Some therapists saw the termination process as a catalyst for improvement: "The fact that I reminded the client that this was our last session made him demonstrate abilities that he had not manifested during the year. He made eye contact, talked to me while he was working…" (I.S., June 15).

**Hindering events Originating from the Therapist.**

***Empathic failures.*** A central theme that emerged from the reports (6/9 events) addressed events in which a failure to empathize had occurred during therapy, where the therapist was unable to identify the clients' needs or reacted to them in a way that was not adequate. In certain cases, the therapists described events in which they intervened or made a remark that in hindsight seemed inappropriate and regretted it in retrospect: "I realized that bringing up the issue of the previous therapist in the context of the work was unnecessary and unhelpful" (I.S., December 6).

***Doubt and a lack of decisiveness.*** Another theme that the therapists reported (4/9 events) addressed doubts and indecisiveness about the appropriate response to real-time events, leading to a sense of unease. For example, one of the therapists described how agreeing to stay with the client in class during a classroom activity that took up some of the session left her feeling uncomfortable: "I was very uncertain about the decision to stay... And I had a bad feeling during the session" (I.S., December 21).

**Events Originating from the Client**

A total of 85 helpful events were reported (69 from I.S. and 16 from G.S.) and a total of 3 hindering events (2 from I.S. and 1 from G.S.) were assigned to this category.

**Helpful events originating from the client.**

***Sharing and exposure.*** A central helpful event (36/85 events) which emerged from the data was one in which the client disclosed personal details, experiences or feelings to the therapist: "The client shared the location of his home on his own initiative... He revealed further personal issues and was more open; this created a feeling of closeness" (I.S., January 18).

***Initiative, independence and activeness.*** Other helpful events that emerged from the data (25/85 events) were those in which the clients exhibited independence or demonstrated initiative during the creative process, during a game, or in the course of the conversation: "The client led the session and was able to initiate a reference to content that frightened him, and be creative – it was the first time he asked to do artwork" (I.S., April 11).

***Introspection.*** Another type of helpful event the therapists noted (16/85 events) was when the clients demonstrated the ability to engage in introspection and expressed

insights into their emotions, motives, and the mental processes they experienced: "His ability to articulate the reason why he is receiving treatment" (G.S., May 5).

***Expressing positive emotion, trust and a sense of commitment towards the therapist and the therapeutic process.*** Other helpful events that emerged from the data in a small number of cases (5/85 events) were those in which positive feelings of trust, appreciation and commitment towards the therapist and/or the therapeutic process were expressed: "The client's statement that I remember everything she says and does was significant. I think that we both felt confident in the therapeutic process and with one another at that moment" (I.S., February 25).

***Creativity and imagination*.** In a small number of cases (5/85 events), the therapists reported a helpful event in which the clients demonstrated creative and original thinking: "The dice in the game that I prepared gave her a creative idea, and from that point on, she allowed herself to engage in a creative flow" (I.S., March 31).

**Hindering events originating from the client.** Since the therapists only reported a few hindering events stemming from the behavior of the clients, these events will be briefly mentioned. They included events which point to an inability to express strong emotions (1/3 events): "Her inability to tell me why she was upset" (I.S., December 27), leaving the room during a session (1/3 events): "He left the room to go to the bathroom for five minutes during the session" (I.S., May 1), and a medical condition that affected the client's functioning (1/3 events): "The client had a virus and it had an effect on her" (I.S., May 22).

**Events which Originated from the Group**

A total of 75 helpful events and seven hindering events were reported.

**Helpful events originating from the group.**

***Joint work.*** This theme included events in which the client took part in a joint group interaction such as playing, creating, or a group discussion (17/75 events). These events were perceived by the therapists as helpful as a way of creating intimacy as well as facilitating a pleasant and playful group environment: "The ball game contributed to a new and different experience in the group, an atmosphere that was not in the previously restrained group, and perhaps even led to another level of closeness" (G.S., February 7);

***Interpersonal relationships.*** This theme incorporated events which reflected the client's membership in a social group resembling the primary family group, in which roles are informally divided, and intimacy, emotions and relationships develop (23/75 events). These events included moments in which the client played a significant role within the group: "She initiated a ball game for the group, led it and taught them how to play while being empathetic toward her friends" (G.S., February 10). Other helpful events were those in which the client was given the opportunity to be included and occupy his/her own space amongst the group members: "The group's joint observation of the artwork gave the client an experience of being seen, a space in which her emotional experiences could be approached at a slow and protected pace" (G.S., February 24). Finally, this theme incorporated helpful events in which the client reached out or received help from others: "Following an incident with one of the children, the whole group joined forces to help him and showed a desire to listen to him" (G.S., December 30).

***Interpersonal understanding.*** This theme (20/75 events) incorporated helpful events in which the clients, as members of a group, acquired awareness of significant aspects of their interpersonal behavior such as their strengths, limitations, and conduct

that evoked undesirable responses towards themselves. For example, a therapist addressed an event in which one of the clients asked another member of the group whether she was quiet because he had arrived late. The therapist believed that this was a helpful event because it indicated the internalization of the client's need to adapt to the needs of the group: "This understanding, in my view, indicates an improvement in self-awareness" (G.S., November 1).

***Exposure to the group.*** This theme incorporated helpful events in which the clients revealed themselves, or when a different member of the group revealed him/herself to the group (15/75 events). When another member of the group is revealed the client is able to learn from and identify with him/her: "The sharing of one of the members in the group about the death of his father's friend in a motorcycle accident led the others to examine their own feelings, because they experienced a form of modeling for expressing feelings" (G.S., November 19). In addition, these events allow clients to get empathy from friends, a sense of belonging and becoming visible to others: "The fact she allowed herself to cry led her to understand that her difficulty was accepted with love, acceptance and understanding."

**Hindering events originating from the group**. Since there were hardly any reports of hindering events that originated from the group, these events will only be briefly mentioned here. Most of the hindering events included in this category (3/7 events) concerned a sense of lack of resources, such as time, space, or attention that members of the group needed to share. A different type of hindering event (2/3 events) related to changes in the composition of the group, for example: "He was uncomfortable with the addition of a new member to the team and expressed his opposition to his

presence repeatedly until the others criticized him for it..." (G.S., no date). Other hindering events (2/7 events) stemmed from rejection, such as in the case of a client whose friend asked her not to address her affectionately by using her nickname.

**Events which Originated from the Creative Work**

A total of 82 helpful events (48 from I.S. and 34 from G.S.) were reported, and no hindering events.

**Relating to the art materials.** This theme incorporated helpful events which stemmed from responses toward the art materials and their properties and included attraction and rejection, exploration, experience and diversity (12/82 events). For example, one of the therapists reported a helpful event in which the client overcame his feelings of repulsion toward one type of art material: "The client actually dared to touch the paper-mâché at the end of the session... which he had previously experienced as repulsive to the touch" (I.S., December 21).

**The creative process.**

***Expressing and processing internal contents*.** This theme incorporated helpful events in which the creative process enabled the clients to express contents from their inner worlds such as emotions, anxieties and fantasies, and to process them at different levels of awareness (19/82 events): "He made two paintings... and described the situation they portrayed... This provided an opportunity to share content from his inner world and to feel that this way he was being seen and listened to" (I.S., May 9).

***The creative process elicits a calm and spontaneous atmosphere***. This theme covered events in which the helpful aspect lay within the ability of creative work to promote a relaxed and calm atmosphere (6/82 events). According to the therapists, this

may promote a sense of freedom and prompt greater spontaneity: "When she was coloring and focused on her work, it helped her to relax, be comfortable, and talk things over" (I.S., November 18).

***Artwork facilitates movement between control and lack of control.*** This theme incorporated events in which the helpful aspect lay within the ability of artwork to serve as a means for achieving a sense of control for the client (3/82 events). One of the therapists described how, in her opinion, a client tried to achieve a sense of control over events in his real life by expressing control in a symbolic setting through a game he invented: "Through the invention of the game and the movement of the players on the board that get bonuses or penalties... he may have been trying to control events in his life" (G.S., February 21). At other times the helpful aspect of the event was perceived as an opportunity to experience lack of control during the creative process: "The process of creating with clay was therapeutic precisely because there was no control or prior knowledge" (G.S., January 4).

**Relating to the final art product.** This theme addressed events related to the art product (42/82 events). One type of helpful event was a joint observation of the artwork created by the client. This joint observation with the therapist or in the group setting may reflect the client's inner world and was described as an intimate moment which satisfies the need to feel visible and accepted: "The joint observation of her work allowed her to feel visible, and created a space where she could approach her own emotional experiences at a slow and protected pace" (G.S., February 24). In addition, observing a sequence of artworks may reflect the nature of the processes the client underwent during therapy and provide new insights in retrospect. One of the therapists described the impact

of the joint observation of the artworks made during the year by several clients: "This contributed to their realization that both of them went through a process at the same time, an experience of a wide range of emotions which they brought to the room and dealt with..." (G.S., May 29). In some cases, looking at artworks while trying to interpret and give them meaning as a way of understanding the client's inner world was mentioned as a helpful event: "Looking at the pictures was the first step to bridging over the two parts: the baby and the adult" (G.S., February 10). Occasionally, the helpful event was described as a moment when the creative work opened the door to a meaningful conversation: "Tying the ribbon around the vessel the client made kindled something between us... The client shared her fears and concerns" (I.S., February 4). Another therapist described an opportunity for symbolic engagement with her client's physical disability after one of the artworks she had worked on broke by accident: "We addressed the loss and the fractures. There was something helpful about it happening with me. We could talk about the pain that it caused and see what was left, instead of only what was broken" (I.S., June 26). A different kind of helpful event that related to the artwork had to do with feelings of satisfaction with the end product, and the presentation of the artwork as a source of pride and empowerment for the client: "Placing the artwork where it can be seen by all allowed him to demonstrate his creative side and get feedback, appreciation and admiration..." (I.S., December 20). Another event addressed the benefits the client derived from the therapist keeping the artwork: "Maybe he got a sense of security and containment, a feeling that I appreciate his work" (I.S., October 22).

**Events that Originated from the Surrounding Environment**

A total of four helpful events and 14 hindering events were reported, all from I.S.

**Helpful events originating from the surrounding environment.** Here, the therapists referred to the processing of experiences close to the time of their occurrence in the school environment (2/4 events): "He spoke about an event that had just occurred in the classroom in front of a girl who tends to insult him... He was stating out loud that he was suffering from social rejection" (I.S., December 2). The therapists also referred to the advantages of seeing their clients in their natural environments (2/4 events): "She wanted to stay in class... and agreed for me to stay with her. That's how I saw her in her own surroundings" (I.S., December 21).

**Hindering events that originated from the surrounding environment.** These included problems maintaining the client's privacy and preserving a safe therapeutic space in situations where the therapy room was experienced as an infiltrated space by external factors such as noise, other children, and staff members (7/14 events): "They [pupils] knocked on the door and interfered in an inappropriate manner - I sent them to the classroom assistant" (I.S., November 16). The therapists also cited physical conditions that were unsuitable for therapy (4/14 events), primarily the rooms allocated for therapy, their size, location and general state: "As a therapist I was annoyed that I had to set up the room every time and make sure that no one entered" (I.S., January 10). Finally, several therapists (3/14 events) referred to the disruption of the continuity of the therapeutic process due to the constraints of the school time table which is filled with school holidays and other events: "The tests, the absences and the changes in the setting affect her mood and the therapeutic relationship" (I.S., May 30).

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to list the significant events in therapeutic sessions as perceived by art therapists who work in the school system. By conducting this type of process research that aims to identify what actually transpires in therapy through the eyes of the therapists, we attempted to expand our understanding of the active ingredients that form the basis for a successful intervention in this setting. Based on the questionnaires completed by the therapists each week during the school year, the findings were compiled into five main categories characterized according to the main source generating these events.

The first category involves events that originated from the therapists' work, their own contribution stemming from their experience and professional knowledge, their physical and mental involvement, and the way in which they structured the therapeutic process. In terms of helpful events, the theme that was mentioned most frequently was events in which an empathic relationship was formed between clients and therapists who were responding and attempting to fulfill their clients' needs. This is similar to results reported in empirical studies addressing common factors in different therapy methods, and also points to the therapeutic alliance and concept of empathy as significant factors that further the process of therapeutic change (for example Laska, Gurman & Wampold, 2014). The hindering events had to do with empathic failures, doubts and indecision on the part of the therapist. These events concur to some extent with three of the six hindering events defined by Elliott (1985) in his classification of significant events, most of which addressed clients' disappointment with the therapist in terms of misconceptions, negative reactions, or misdirection on the part of the therapist.

The second category involves events which originated from the clients, their willingness and motivation to engage in therapy, their use of personal abilities and strengths, and the processes they underwent. In this category, the most prominent theme emerging from the helpful events was sharing and disclosure on the part of the client. This is in line with the prevailing view in the literature that people who feel comfortable with self-disclosure develop positive attitudes towards therapy and may therefore seek out therapy and benefit from it (Abdollahi, Hosseinian, Beh-Pajooh & Carlbring, 2017; Bathje, Kim, Rau, Bassiouny & Kim 2014; Wheaton, Sternberg, McFarlane, & Sarda, 2016). The number of hindering events was insignificant, which may indicate that client-related behaviors, even if they may appear negative, are perceived by the therapist as part of the therapeutic process, rather than as a factor that hinders therapy.

The third category involves events which originated from the group, the relationships it facilitated and the social learning processes that resulted from them. In this category, the helpful events included interpersonal learning, interpersonal relationships, joint work and self-disclosure. These themes all apply to group therapy in general and are mentioned in the literature (Yalom, 2005). Unique to art therapy was the theme of joint work, which may indicate that joint activity in and of itself has therapeutic value in art therapy (Shechtman & Perl-Dekel, 2000). Most of the hindering events addressed the lack of resources such as time, space or attention. Similarly, in the literature on group therapy, jealousy and competition for resources have been cited as a possible source of hostility within groups which stems from unconscious remnants of sibling rivalry (Yalom, 2005).

The fourth category involves events which originated from the use of art in therapy, including the materials, the creative process and the art product. In this category, the most prominent helpful event was joint reference by the client and the therapist and/or the group to the art product. There were no hindering events. Joint observation of the art product was perceived as an intimate moment in which the therapist helps the client to find the connections between the inner experience reflected in the work and the parallel processes that occur in external reality. Within this moment, the emotional experience can be understood and given meaning (McMurray & Schwartz-Mirman, 2001). However, previous studies have indicated that at times, due to features related to the educational system setting, this type of observation is impossible (Snir et al., 2017). The therapists' perceptions that these moments can advance the therapeutic process suggest they are crucial and point to the need to allow sufficient time frames within the school setting to enable the creative use of art materials and the time to reflect, contemplate and relate to this artistic activity.

The fifth category involves events which originated from the school environment. This category is supported by previous studies (Snir et al., 2017), but unlike other categories in this study, the number of helpful events reported was small in comparison to the number of hindering events. However, contrary to previous findings (Snir et al., 2017), when the therapists were asked to report hindering events on a weekly basis, the number of difficulties relating to the school system substantially decreased. While these difficulties exist, they do not seem to significantly encroach on the therapy room, and the therapists nevertheless manage to preserve the therapeutic bubble and turn these environmental disturbances into white noise.

This study is the first to have examined significant events in art therapy, and in particular art therapy that targets students within the school system. Most of the significant events reported by the therapists are no different from events reported in previous studies on verbal psychotherapy (e.g. Cummings, Slemon, & Hallberg, 1993; Elliott, 1985; Heppner, Rosenberg & Hedgespeth, 1992; Moreno, Fuhriman, & Hileman, 1995; Timulak, Belicova, & Miler, 2003; Timulak & Lietaer, 2001; Wilcox-Matthew, Ottens, & Minor, 1997). Most of these events deal with human factors in therapy such as the therapist, the client and the group, and the relationships between them, or features of the therapeutic framework and the process of therapeutic change. At the same time, the findings here expand on the issue of observation of the artwork as another component within these relationships (Case, 1990, Schaverien, 2000).

In this context, it is noteworthy that the therapists perceived the proportion of significant events that originated from artistic work to be lower than events originating from human factors and contexts (82 helpful events originating from the creative process out of a total of 419 helpful events in total). This finding appears to contradict the prime importance ascribed to artwork and its central role in the therapeutic process, and the theoretical claim that the process of artistic creation has a therapeutic effect on the maker (Regev & Guttmann, 2005). However, the therapists may not have mentioned the use of art as a significant event precisely because it is seen as a basic component of the therapeutic process, and that its positive effect is self-evident and not perceived as out of the ordinary. This argument is further strengthened by a parallel study conducted with the same participants which analyzed their diary entries on the nature of the therapeutic process within the educational system (Adoni-Kroyanker et al., 2018). It showed that

when therapists described the entirety of their work and did not focus on specific events, they referred amply to the therapeutic significance of the artwork including the materials, the creative process and the final product. Nevertheless, these findings suggest we should consider ways to enhance the use of art as an additional means of communication, or as a third-party party in the client-therapist-art triangular relationship (Regev & Snir, 2013).

Overall, the data indicate that the therapists reported more helpful events than significantly hindering events, as reported in other studies (Timulak, 2010). In addition, with a few exceptions, the therapists rarely reported empathic failures. This trend may possibly be attributed to the therapists' view of the therapeutic process as one in which disorders or failures are a normal phenomenon and can, with proper management, lead to a meaningful therapeutic experience (Mordecai, 1991). Therefore, they do not necessarily perceive them as hindering events. This is similar to Kohut's view of the positive contribution of the non-traumatic failure of the environment in the establishment of an internal psychological structure that regulates self-worth (Kohut, 2009).

Nevertheless, the division between events during the therapeutic process and their classification as helpful or hindering remains artificial because events may be multidimensional and helpful events may contain hindering aspects and vice versa (Timulak, 2010). In addition, significant events can be defined as characteristics of the therapeutic process and as an outcome of this process. For example, a specific insight may facilitate the process of therapy (Orkibi, Azoulay, Snir & Regev, 2017) and also be one of its goals. This issue was raised in a study by Quick and colleagues (2017), who reexamined the classification of Timulak's helpful events (2007) in group therapy as part

of the *voicing* category. They argued that some clients identified voicing as a meaningful part of the process whereas for others it was viewed as an outcome.

This study has several methodological limitations that may have influenced the findings. The significant events during the therapeutic process were identified from self-reports which may be subject to biases such as selective memory or the need for social desirability, as well as the subjective point of view of the therapists. Further, the sample in this study was composed of therapists who voluntarily agreed to participate and clients that were not randomly selected, but rather specifically chosen by the therapists. This may have also affected the representation of the sample, despite the fact that the therapists did not know their clients at the beginning of the school year. Finally, in this preliminary study, due to the young age of the clients and our interest in interfering as little as possible in the therapeutic processes, we decided not to record their perceptions of the events and we thus confined ourselves strictly to the viewpoints of the therapists. In view of these research limitations, there is a need to expand the sample and its representation to obtain a better picture and reliably reflect the situation in the field. Further research could probe these young clients' perspective by using guided interviews.

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Table 1
*Therapists' demographics*

| No. | Age | Education | Experience | Theoretical approach to therapy | Therapeutic work settings |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 36 | Bachelor's degree | Under 5 years | Other/ no specific approach | Public |
| 2 | 51 | Master's degree | Under 5 years | Psychodynamic analytical | Public |
| 3 | 48 | Master's degree | Over 10 years | Cognitive Behavioral | Public and Private |
| 4 | 30 | Bachelor's degree | Under 5 years | Phenomenological | Public |
| 5 | 56 | Missing data | Over 10 years | Phenomenological | Public and Private |
| 6 | Missing data | Missing data | 5-10 years | Other/ no specific approach | Public and Private |
| 7 | 51 | Bachelor's degree | 5-10 years | Other/ no specific approach | Public |
| 8 | 40 | Bachelor's degree | 5-10 years | Other/ no specific approach | Public |
| 9 | 32 | Master's degree | 5-10 years | Phenomenological | Public |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 10 | 47 | Bachelor's degree | Over 10 years | Other/ no specific approach | Public |
| 11 | 46 | Master's degree | Over 10 years | Phenomenological | Public and Private |
| 12 | 45 | Master's degree | 5-10 years | Other/ no specific approach | Public |
| 13 | 47 | Bachelor's degree | 5-10 years | Cognitive Behavioral | Public and Private |
| 14 | 39 | Master's degree | 5-10 years | Psychodynamic analytical | Public and Private |
| 15 | 46 | Master's degree | Over 10 years | Psychodynamic analytical | Public |
| 16 | 39 | Master's degree | 5-10 years | Other/ no specific approach | Public and Private |

Table 2. *Division of Helpful events to categories and themes*.

| Events originating from the therapist | Prevalence (%) | Events originating from the client | Prevalence (%) | Events originating from the group | Prevalence (%) | Events originating from the creative work | Prevalence (%) | Events originating from the surrounding environment | Prevalence (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| An empathic connection, responsiveness and attunement to the client's experience and needs in the "here and now" | 36.5 | Sharing and exposure | 42 | Joint work | 23 | Relating to the art materials | 15 | processing of experiences close to the time of their occurrence | 50 |
| Using processes that promote insight - mirroring and interpretation | 8 | Initiative, independence and activeness | 29 | Interpersonal relationships | 30 | Expressing and processing internal contents | 23 | seeing the clients in their natural environments | 50 |
| How the therapist engages herself - self-disclosure, modeling and counter-transference | 8 | Introspection | 18 | Interpersonal understanding | 27 | The creative process elicits a calm and spontaneous atmosphere | 7 | | |
| Structuring the therapeutic framework | 19.5 | Expressing positive emotion, trust and a sense of commitment towards the therapist and the therapeutic process | 5.5 | Exposure to the group | 20 | Artwork facilitates movement between control and lack of control | 4 | | |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Using play during the therapeutic session | 10.5 | Creativity and imagination | 5.5 | Relating to the final art product | 51 |
| Conversation about the nature of therapy | 5 | | | | |
| Providing information | 4.5 | | | | |
| Offering technical assistance | 3 | | | | |
| A focus on processing the termination of therapy | 5 | | | | |

Table 3. *Division of hindering events to categories and themes*.

| Events originating from the therapist | Prevalence (%) | Events originating from the client | Prevalence (%) | Events originating from the group | Prevalence (%) | Events originating from the creative work | Prevalence (%) | Events originating from the surrounding environment | Prevalence (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Empathic failures | 66 | Inability to express strong emotions | 33 | Lack of resources: time, space, or attention | 42.7 | | | problems maintaining privacy and a safe therapeutic space | 50 |
| Doubt and a lack of decisiveness | 44 | Leaving during session | 33 | Changes in the group's composition | 28.6 | | | physical conditions unsuitable for therapy | 29 |
| | | Medical condition that affected the client's functioning | 33 | Rejection | 28.7 | | | disruption of the continuity of the therapeutic process | 21 |