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Creativity of persons with impaired eyesight as a therapeutic process **Twórczość osób z dysfunkcją narządu wzroku jako proces terapeutyczny**

Summary

Creative work of persons with disabilities has therapeutic functions. Reception of art and its practical implementation gives an opportunity to express oneself, raises the value of one's own person, allows self-acceptance, and establishes contact with the social world. People who are blind and visually impaired, through art express their emotions, proving their outstanding abilities. Also, artistic creation gives a sense of power and agency, and is an important prerequisite for success on the road to self-realization. This paper shows the value of the arts for people with reduced vision and its compensatory role in psychological and social development of disabled persons. It also indicates directions of therapeutic interventions through art.

Key words: creativity, disability, rehabilitation, art, self-acceptance, personality, needs

Streszczenia

Twórczość osób niepełnosprawnych pełni funkcje terapeutyczne. Odbiór sztuki jak i jej praktyczna realizacja daje możliwość wyrażania siebie, podnosi wartość własnej osoby, umożliwia samoakceptację i kontakt ze światem społecznym. Osoby niewidome i słabo widzące poprzez sztukę wyrażają swoje emocje, udowadniają swoje ponadprzeciętne możliwości. Tworzenie daje również poczucie mocy i sprawstwa oraz stanowi ważny warunek sukcesu na drodze do samorealizacji. Niniejszy artykuł ukazuje wartość sztuki dla osób z dysfunkcją narządu wzroku oraz jej kompensacyjne znaczenie dla rozwoju psychospołecznego człowieka niepełnosprawnego. Wskazuje ponadto kierunki oddziaływań terapeutycznych za pomocą sztuki.

Słowa kluczowe: twórczość, niepełnosprawność, rehabilitacja, sztuka, samoakceptacja, osobowość, potrzeby

Introduction

Artistic creation of new dimensions that reflects the inner reality of the creator may be therapeutic. It relieves internal tensions, allows recovery from pathological thoughts, attitudes, motives; it also strengthens healthy personality. Furthermore, it teaches:

- independent action aimed at maintaining a distant target,
- openness to experience,
- courage to reveal one's distinctiveness,
- recognizing one's own strengths and abilities,
- courage to be creative and original that extends to many areas of life (Hryniewicka 2000a).

If successful, it enhances self-esteem, triggers a feeling of victory over oneself, especially over one's own inertia, as well as over an object, which thanks to efforts gradually approaches one's creative plan. In addition, it releases from neurotic problems, thus allowing to face adversity, drift, and help to struggle with real problems of life. Moreover, it maintains relative stability and serenity in the face of strong blows, deprivation, and frustration. Also, it has a very close relationship with formation of a creative attitude, without which it is difficult to solve complex problems arising from disability (Hryniewicka 2000b).

Cultural participation has a rehabilitative quality because it leads to intellectual and emotional activity in perceiving the world in terms of intellectual and emotional self-expression, and tangible transformation of the surrounding reality (Czerwińska 2004).

Art and culture can and should attain the following cultural, therapeutical, and psychological and social objectives of self-realization:

- mediation between the individual and society,
- organization of safe places of protection against violence and aggression,
- prevention of alienation of personal issues and problems,
- creation of a space of acceptance, support and sustainability,
- promotion of success and satisfaction (Dykcik 2003).

"Any proposed and preferred types of creative research used currently to stimulate enthusiasm and develop activity of the disabled in art therapy, music, theater, and dance, are at the same time both art and craft, work and play, and serve as internal source of increased developmental energy and enrichment of personal spirituality. Every type of art practice can arouse spontaneous enthusiasm in achieving future goals, by triggering internal processes that can release huge energy of excitement" (Dykcik 2003, p. 15).

Art plays a huge role in everyone's life, but for people with disabilities it takes on new values. It gives an opportunity to transcend one's limits thus providing hope for success. It prevents stagnation, stimulates internal bodily forces to act, and creates a positive image of oneself. Art provides a platform for social interaction for people with disabilities with non-disabled persons, preventing discrimination and diminishing harmful stereotypes concerning the disabled.

The process of adapting to a situation of disability is often long and painful, both for the disabled and their nearest and dearest. This is accompanied by overcoming many obstacles, difficulties, and social stereotypes. One way of facilitating and easing this process is by way of artistic practice. Certainly, art should be used to rebuild natural conditions of life necessary to salvage not only biological but also spiritual harmony of human beings (Hryniewicka 2000a). "People take beliefs about their dignity on the basis of activity, e.g. directed at other people, or activity which is manifested in creative work. The possibility to be helpful for other people, and above all by way of creative work, shapes a sense of one's authentic value" (Kozielecki 1977, p. 17).

Research objectives and presentation of collected data

The purpose of this paper is to show the significance of creative activity among people who are blind or visually impaired from a therapeutic viewpoint, and to describe ways for the use of therapeutic Arts for people with reduced vision. The present work also includes numerous examples of creative activities of people with impaired eyesight as well as examples of initiatives aimed at facilitating encounters with art for them.

Vision plays a dominant role in human life. It is the source of about 80% of information coming from the environment. Ocular damage or partial loss of vision affects the functioning of the whole body in all spheres of human life, which consequently loses the most important way of understanding the outside world. The resultant impoverishment of cognitive processes pertaining to visual content needs compensation processes, including the areas of art as well. Dysfunction of the eye, contrary to popular opinion, does not limit forms of participation in the Arts. However, it raises the need to explore a variety of alternative ways of receiving art.

E. Jutrzyzna (2003a) in his thoughts on the perception of music in terms of visual deprivation states the following theses:

- Visual deprivation complicates the process of “growing” of children to independent life. Therefore, the main cause of differences in their perception of the aesthetic sphere is a reduction of the needs of patients with impaired eyesight occurring as a result of difficulties in establishing and maintaining regular contacts and relationships with the surrounding social environment.
- Eye disorders predispose some difficulties during the perception of decoding and understanding of aesthetic information into accessible and understandable for visually impaired people language according to their cognitive – personal circumstances.
- Complex reconstruction process of compensation - correcting psychological well-being of blind or partly seeing children - involves the use of all non-defective modalities.
- Feelings, aesthetic imagination, arise not only during visual perception, but also perception involving participation of other senses. Therefore, the main direction of activities related to the reconstruction of the aesthetic sphere of compensation should be the development of a child in his ability to adequately receive, reflect in their awareness of the world around them by means of integrating activities of substitutional analyzers.

Dealing with different forms of art is a value that should be promoted and perceived by people with disabilities. Studies concerning cultural preferences of disabled youth, conducted by H. Żuraw (1996), show that they prefer the following areas of culture: literature, music, film, theater, painting, sculpture, and dance.

Among visually-impaired young people reading, sculpture, playing instruments, and singing are the most popular. Research points to intensification of reading among people who are blind and visually impaired. H. Żuraw (1996) states that reasons for this phenomenon can be traced back to:

- better dictionary performance of the described group,
- availability of reading, including larger volumes, thanks to the use of techniques that adapt reading for perceptive abilities of the group.

Blind people, who know Braille’s alphabet fluently, can spend time reading books written in this way. The Central Library of this kind of books lends them on the spot or sends them to readers. A lot of people use audiobooks as well. The procedure for borrowing these books is the same as in the case of Braille’s books (Kuczyńska – Kwapisz, Kwapisz 1996). Books can also be borrowed at the Multimedia Library Center in Laski and other libraries located in major Polish cities. A book borrowed from an Online Library Website on the screen has the appearance of an ordinary book - with illustrations, graphic chip pages, tables of contents, chapters, and placement of text on

pages. The text on the screen can be enlarged for the visually impaired, whereas as far as the blind are concerned contents of the book are also available through synthetic speech or the Braille's function (Samonek 2003). In words of one of the founders of the library's multimultimedia management web system - Piotr Brzoza, "the system enables cataloging and collection on a server publishing of rich media: e-books and magazines, audiobooks, audio recordings, and videos tailored to the needs and capabilities of visually impaired people; it ensures sharing of collected publications via the Internet in a way that does not conflict with the rules of the copyright law; it enhances management of readers' orders. It is supported by standard web browsers" (Szczepański 2003).

Many blind people not only read but also write; J. Kuczyńska – Kwapisz and J. Kwapisz state that "a particularly important place in this creative work pertains to literature, especially memoirs, but there are other genres as well, such as: epigrams, quips, aphorisms, legends, reports, stories, poetry, plays and many other. Polish Association of the Blind supports literary creative work by organizing competitions and printing interesting materials" (Kuczyńska – Kwapisz, Kwapisz 1996, p. 53).

R. Polaszek, who leads theater classes for partially or wholly blind children, points to a different area of culture. He claims that "theater is a comprehensive creative style whose appeal lies in the fact that it integrates different areas of expression - word, gesture, dance, movement, music, visual arts, which can have a positive impact on the personality of young people. Especially in the case of visually impaired young people, in whom there are deficits of visual stimuli, theatrical activities represent an opportunity to come "out of the shadows", as it were, and make possible other areas of perceptual awareness to become important" (Polaszek 2002, p. 110). Theater classes teach not only creative attitude, but also have a therapeutic aspect. Lack of self-esteem, complexes, personality disorders, stemming from the absence, or weakness, of family ties, hyperactivity, and other negative consequences of the failure of vision, constitute a challenge for the theater so that it could be a remedy for such ailments.

J. Kuczyńska – Kwapisz and J. Kwapisz (1996) indicate that many blind people achieve very good results in handicrafts, metalwork, and sculpture using various materials. For several years, the Polish Association of the Blind organizes open-air sculpture events for its members. With a little help blind people can also go to a theater, operetta, opera, cinema, or a concert. Some, who play different instruments, form bands, sing, belong to choirs or vocal groups.

Of all the Arts music thanks to its essential sounding nature is for blind and partially seeing people possibly the closest. It is distinguished from other forms of art due to particularly strong and direct impact on almost all aspects of human personality. It goes into people's perception through ears - a sense that is not deficient in any way by the impairment of the sight. Due to the fact that perception of musical art is not distorted by vision defects and it takes place thanks to the ear canal, visually disabled persons have a great potential for experiencing music and can enjoy unlimited benefits from such encounter. Music therapy for persons with visual impairment is one of the varieties of art therapy, it deals with children, adolescents and adults, both blind and visually impaired. The aim of music therapy for persons with visual impairment is to prepare patients to function in the non-disabled community by supporting their personal development, correction, compensating for deficiencies occurring due to defects and developmental disabilities, as well as meeting their specific needs and expectations (Kataryńczuk – Mania 2005).

Blind people often surprise with their abilities and talents, performing various unique artworks. "Illustrious blind people enjoy respect and even admiration in society, which results not only from recognition of their talent and achievements, but also by acknowledging high effort that allowed them to overcome the barrier created by the disability" (Palak 1999, p.176). There is for example a well known blind woman who arranges compositions from dried flowers and plants that win many awards at organized exhibitions. Also, Stanislaw Hermanowicz creates stunning drawings; he amazes ordinary men as well as professional artists by the fact that as a totally blind man he makes very beautiful and technically difficult works that are not smooth reliefs, and therefore not possible to verify with the touch (Kuczyńska – Kwapisz, Kwapisz 1996). The fact of disability reinforces the impact of such figures and their works, it moves the imagination of recipients, gives blind creators reliability, raises the fascination of encountering some impenetrable mystery of seeing the world in a different dimension than that which is given to a healthy man (Zawadzki, Zawadzka 2002).

However, an important issue, as E. Jutrzyzna observes (2003c), is celebrating small, creative achievements of people with disabilities. A flower molded from plasticine or a simple pattern embroidered by a blind child may not be considered high art, but it certainly is a product of creativity and will have its own significant value to the person who creates it. It is possible to find many examples where a created product of a disabled person is considered from a standpoint of an outstanding work item, whereas their creative desire is not part of the assessment. In this way quite often people overthrow humanist values which are the basis of human existence. "Although not all creations deserve the title of outstanding works of art, certainly, given the accompanying effort put into their formation and overcoming one's own weaknesses, shortcomings and limitations, they nonetheless provide us with an opportunity to revise our judgments about existence, which has been recently dubbed as worthless" (Hryniewicka 2000b, p. 28).

If the act of creation results in a product valuable only for a creative entity that forms it, then the creative attitude itself becomes more important, i.e. the process of creativity. The value of such product will be measured by the sum of the experience invested in its making. The most important issue here is an act of creative exploration, creative expression of known content, which will culminate in the creation of new elements that had not previously existed. Therefore, the creator of Polish special needs education, Maria Grzegorzewska, considered creative work as one of the fundamental features of rehabilitation for persons with disabilities (Jutrzyzna 2003c).

Hence, it is worthwhile to inculcate in blind and partially sighted people willingness to actively participate in cultural life, to educate them for creative dispositions and the ability to enjoy the arts (its forms and types) (Osik – Chudowolska 2003).

In creating expressive and impressionistic attitudes, invaluable role is played by different types of associations, foundations, and social movements in order to spread the idea of art as a form of integration of people with disabilities, supporting them in the development by organizing retreats, workshops, creative work, granting of scholarships that reproduce work in the form of greeting cards, calendars, books of poetry, collections of short stories and invitations to participate in numerous events with a range of not only local, but also at national, and international levels, such as exhibitions, festivals, reviews of artistic creativity (Hryniewicka 2000b).

A major role in meeting these needs play rehabilitation camps for people with artistic talents who want to learn different forms of cultural activity. Employed instructors not only lead specialized activities, arts and crafts, discover new talents, but also show the possibility of their development and encourage improvement of artistic skills (Biniakiewicz 1996).

Great possibilities of artistic reception for visually handicapped persons is made easier by modern technology, through which many things are possible that heretofore were considered as insurmountable barriers as far as blind people were concerned. One example is a unique in the country Touch Gallery established at the Museum of Art in Lodz. The intention of the developers is to create convex images of greatest painters and graphic artists of Polish and foreign origin. This is possible thanks to an innovative method which involves conversion of selected works of art by using a suitable computer graphics program, printed on a special bulging paper in different thicknesses, taking on a different texture (depending on the color) when subjected to heat treatment. This creates a vivid picture of the work of art, which also has a possibility of saturation of each color. This image must be somewhat simplified by eliminating many less important details, so that the picture can be more tactile. Reading these images is not easy and requires a lot of practice. However, according to the authors it produces excellent results. So far, the Touch Gallery has organized exhibitions that allowed blind people to read works of such artists as: Wladyslaw Strzeminski, Szymon Syrkus, Wacław Szpakowski, Edvard Munch, Stanisław Fijałkowski, Jean Arp, Milan Grigar, Joana Holion, Henri Michaux and others (Korowajczyk 2002).

Another interesting form of contact for the blind and visually impaired with art are exhibitions, such as e.g. copies of historical glass exhibition, organized according to the needs and cognitive abilities of these individuals. All exhibits of that exhibition could be easily touched. Visitors had access to a description of the exhibits in Braille and plain print (Szczurek 2003).

Information about how art can be shown to blind and partially seeing children can be obtained by attending classes in the Silesian Museum in Katowice under the title "To Touch Art". During the sessions children learn in practice how a painting is made. Having this knowledge they watch later paintings with their own hands. Visually impaired people can see the original works and contrasting reproductions, devoid of details, but with intensely colored highlighted spots. Blind people learn the content of a painting by touching contour reproductions of the image in convex print. Touch-watching is accompanied by a work description. People with visual disabilities have an opportunity to compose their own image from earlier prepared requisites such as fabrics with different textures, dishes, fruit, and other miscellaneous things.

Lots of interesting exhibitions are organized by the Central Library of the Polish Association for the Blind in Warsaw. There are exhibitions of sculptures, paintings, drawings, prints, and photographs of artists both with and without disabilities. The Gallery also exhibits concerts and demonstrations of equipment facilitating daily operations of visually impaired people.

Despite a number of initiatives that attempt to bring the arts to people with sensory disabilities (examples of which I gave above), it is not always appreciated and still too little people with disabilities enjoy its benefits.

E. Jutrzyzna (2003b) discusses the development of aesthetic needs of the blind and observes a strong downward tendency to lower its level, which may indicate that beauty and aesthetic values become less important and slowly disappear from the lives of people with profound visual impairments. 90% of the disabled do not attend neither theaters, cinemas, concerts, exhibitions nor any other cultural events at all. Preponderance of mostly passive homely participation in culture over active outdoor is almost a rule. Research of M. Czerwińska (2004) shows that in the cultural life of visually-impaired the most popular are so-called easy-going cultural institutions (such as concerts, festivals). Participation in the so-called institutions of high culture (theaters, concert halls, museums, art galleries) is negligible. Another cause for concern is relatively low library attendance – considering the fact that it is a widely available institution. Research shows a low level of participation of blind people in cultural life, while at the same time being interested in culture and declaring wish to use offers of cultural institutions. This is confirmed by research of E. Skrzetuska, D. Osik – Chudowolska and A. Wojnarska (2002), who state that cultural life in the group of persons with disabilities is not too complex.

People with reduced vision, despite low participation in culture, give it a specific meaning, recognizing by the same token the role of culture in personal and social life. For the majority of respondents culture is important in terms of compensation and entertainment, rarely - cognitively. Few people pointed to self developing and integrational features. People with severe ocular dysfunction more frequently than those with a moderate level see culture as helping acceptance of themselves and their disability (Czerwińska 2004).

Conclusions

Creative work plays a major role in the therapeutic process. The variety of its forms, strength and impact causes endless possibilities of influencing mental, physical, social, educational, etc. areas. However, the downward trend in the level of participation in cultural life and decreasing number of people who see the potential for art in rehabilitation, imposes the need to take measures to encourage visually disabled persons to actively participate in art therapy.

Based on the above considerations, the following directions of therapeutic interventions using art to people with reduced vision are to be made:

- Contact of visually impaired people with different types of art through participation in exhibitions, concerts, museum visits, meetings with artists, etc., should be available for the widest range of people.
- Opportunities for independent artistic activity should be provided. Active contact with different types of art will help to define oneself in the artistic realm.
- Stereotypical beliefs about total unavailability of certain forms of art for the blind and visually impaired must be overcome.
- There is a need to extend the set of means and methods of collection of art and acts of making art.
- Persons with visual disabilities should be enabled to present their artistic achievements. It will increase the knowledge of the non disabled members of the society as far as the abilities of disabled people are concerned, which may result in bringing about a plane

- of acceptance, understanding, and mutual respect.
- There is a need to prepare those who are involved in the art of working with blind and partially seeing. Knowledge of their cognitive abilities, and ways of revalidation will allow to optimize contact with art.
 - There is a need to organize meetings with blind artists to encourage people with disabilities to take creative actions, and to identify opportunities for overcoming their limitations.
 - It is important to raise awareness that art should not be understood only in terms of creating great works. It is important to perceive the value of creativity in everyday activities that foster positive emotions and allow for self-realization.

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