

Intergenerational Poverty and Art Therapy as an Intervention Tool

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Author Note

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Abstract

This paper discusses the significant consequences of the intergenerational poverty cycle. The repetition of the cycle overtime causes many different outcomes. These outcomes include addictions such as drugs, alcoholism, an unstable home life for youth, as well as living below the average means of living above the poverty level. Art therapy comes into play with the intergenerational poverty cycle as an intervention tool. Intervention methods such as art therapy provide a positive experience for those enduring the intergenerational poverty cycle. Self-expression, self-awareness, connecting with others, as well as providing a non-judgmental agency are all examples of what is proven when using art therapy as an intervention. Youth growing up in the intergenerational poverty cycle specifically need art therapy as an intervention tool. Art therapy provides the social skills pre-teens need to succeed in school and life. If interventions like art therapy are not implemented, intergenerational poverty is a cycle that may remain as a constant in our society. This is an undergraduate capstone thesis paper, which means methods, results, and discussions are not included, this data can be included at the graduate level. The research conducted in this paper can be an ongoing career path since intergenerational poverty is a subject which densely populated in the mental health profession.

Keywords: at-risk youth, inner city poverty, youth, intergenerational poverty, art therapy, low-income families, addiction in intergenerational poverty, school counseling

Intergenerational Poverty and Art Therapy as an Intervention Tool

Intergenerational poverty is a cycle which remains consistent throughout the cycle of life. Effects of intergenerational poverty include alcoholism, a rift in family dynamics, drug addictions, as well as an educational decline early as childhood. To break this cycle different intervention methods have been conducted. Youth especially are affected by the cycle; due to the different effects it brings throughout life. One intervention method that can be used to break this cycle is the use of Art Therapy. Art Therapy can be used as an intervention tool to evolve social development skills for youth living in an intergenerational poverty cycle.

Intergenerational Poverty

Intergenerational poverty is a cycle that remains the same throughout our society. This term is defined with multiple examples which relate to current and historical educational levels, different incomes, and job securities. Those who have experienced the intergenerational poverty cycle their education and learning levels have improved, but parenting remains a huge issue today (Smith, 2015). The housing market has issues with pricing and discrimination towards races which continuously keeps families in the cycle remaining in low-income neighborhoods year after year (Owens, 2017). Owens (2017) claims that “72% of black children, compared to only 40% of white children, who grew up in the poorest quarter of neighborhoods remain in these types of neighborhoods as adults” (p. 401). Resources for financial aid are constantly making an impact in these communities, this is because the affordable housing market is scarce. Which results have shown that pricing of homes typically forces low-income families out of most neighborhoods (Owens, 2017, and Smith, 2015).

The Department of Housing and Urban development estimated in 2015, that approximately 12 million households in the United States pay more than fifty percent of their

yearly income for housing mortgages and costs. The neighborhood experience and lifestyle can also influence the outcome of a youth's life. These neighborhood conditions for youth play a huge role in the future through socioeconomic outcomes. Having lived in poverty for years this can affect youths' future occupations and lifestyle.

With the conditions, drug and alcohol abuse in parents is also a factor which can cause the cycle for youth to remain consistent. Living with drug and alcohol abuse make it easier for youth to fall into those addiction patterns as well. Substance abuse was hardly considered an issue in the past in relation to intergenerational poverty. Drug and alcohol abuse is only affected by this cycle when youth are trying to move out of low-income neighborhoods as adults. States across America have housing assistance for those who are and who have been recovering from substance abuse. Further research needs to be conducted to see if these programs of housing assistance truly help substance abusers and their children (Owens, 2017).

To break this cycle, family members, which are typically grandparents provide a safe space for youth to live and grow between the unstable housing situations they grow up in. Data and research show that young adults moved between independent living arrangements, and their own parents house while growing up. Low-income families must rely on social networking which include local and homogenous programs for financial hardships when in the cycle. Although homelessness is an issue for all populations, children specifically encounter mental health issues, physical health problems, a decrease in academia, and an unknown future (Heise, 2011). Poverty plays a negative affect through development (Duncan et al., 1994), and a decrease on completing high school (Haveman et al., 1991, Tilahun, 2021).

In the year of 2010, about fifty percent of the families living on fixed incomes lived in poverty rates above twenty percent. Ten percent of those households lived in "concentrated

poverty” homes with a rate over forty percent (Owens, 2017). According to Leung (2018), “approximately 8.3 million children under 18 years of age lived with at least one parent who abused illicit drugs or alcohol during the past year” (p. 1344). “In 2018 the U.S. Census Bureau estimated the official poverty rate at 11.8% and among children that rate was estimated to be 16.2%” (Tilahuan, p. 209). By estimation and surveys, “50% of Americans will have experienced a year in poverty by [the] age [of] 65” (Tilahuan p. 209).

Youth’s Social Development Skills in Intergenerational Poverty

Social development skills are critical for everyone, but especially those living in an intergenerational poverty cycle. Youth who are apart of low-income families can develop social, or behavioral problems. These issues are related to learning, and attention deficit disorders. Social development decline in children begins much earlier than people realize. Smith (2013) quotes “Children growing up in low-income families, defined as incomes less than 200 percent of the federal poverty level, enter elementary school about one year behind their peers in vocabulary, general knowledge, early math skills, and pre literacy skills” (p. 66).

As a society, we need to help youth in the intergenerational poverty cycle by increasing their levels of school readiness through early head start programs. By helping the level of academic excellence, it would be an equalization of opportunities. These opprotunities can be used to promote employment, and an increase in social mobilization for families below the poverty line (Smith, 2013). These head start programs are funded by the government to help those who were “educationally disadvantaged by family legacies of exclusion, discrimination, wage suppression, and oppression (Vinovskis et. al. 2005)” (Smith, 2013). Smith (2013) also believes, “lower academic achievement disproportionally affects racial and ethnic minorities” (p. 66). Building relationships and social skills, youth will be able to solve problems, gain a stronger

vocabulary, work on communication skills, and create a bond with each other that creates a sense of purpose. Youth in the intergenerational poverty cycle gain social skills through these early head start programs, and art therapy programs using different opportunities for them to learn from one another and practice interpersonal skills. Leung (2018) quotes “[youth] develop self-regulatory skills, become more aware of their emotions, and learn to express their emotions in healthy ways” (p. 1345).

Youth Living in Intergenerational Poverty and Art Therapy

Art therapy is an important intervention method for everyone, but especially for those in the intergenerational poverty cycle. To break this cycle multiple processes of art therapy have been established throughout the United States. These processes include open studio practices, discussion and witnessing, as well as self-expression through different experientials and journal entries.

The open studio practice was developed by a group of art therapist in the City of Chicago in the late 1990s. Sutherland (2010) said the open studio concept was established because, “the Illinois Children’s Mental Health Task Force [established in 2003], [stated] [that] 70% to 80% of Chicago Public Schools youth [are] in need of help, [and] do not receive appropriate and necessary mental health services” (p. 69). One of Chicago’s first practices of the open studio process was Art Therapy Connection. Art Therapy Connection also known as ATC was found by Judy Sutherland, and one other art therapist as a “non-profit organization”. ATC was established to connect youth with mental health needs as a way for them to stay in school. Since the opening of the organization over a thousand students have been to Art Therapy Connection in the city of Chicago. Sutherland states that she and her co-founder created ATC to help meet the standards of helping troubled youth with mental health issues, as well as strengthen youth’s sense of

belonging and the motivation to stay in school. ATC believes in working in the inner-city public-school system of Chicago, especially those that meet standards of living below the socioeconomic means, with the sense that educational desires of students tend to be a struggle. Sutherland states “of the families living in areas served by ATC, 82.5% to 100% [of the youth] are living in or below the federal poverty threshold” (Sutherland p. 70). ATC believes in all cultural differences and strives for the pre-teens to become one big group through “[cooperation] and to create new meaning for their lives without sacrificing their uniqueness as individuals” (Dreikurs et. al 1986).

Art Therapy connection was established to only be a yearlong art therapy program to help students with little to no access of mental health recourses. ATC works with youth to establish a sense of “self-awareness and self-management skills by integrating art and creativity through therapy” (p. 70). To participate in the ATC program youth must have poor grades, be absent from school consistently, depressed, disrespectful, and in need of special attention. With youth having these behaviors, therapist speak consistently with their teachers. Speaking with these teachers will help in the long run because it provides “continuity in service for the youth”. Providing constant communication between these groups offers the youth a sense of community and safety net of trust which is not typically constant in their life.

Sutherland claims that “[one] ATC philosophy is based on the belief that humans are special beings who are socially motivated, [and] are always in the process of becoming and actively creating their own reality” (p. 70). This philosophy is designed to help the youth relate with one another in a group setting to gain awareness of how they interact with others, whether it be with family members, friends, teachers, or even strangers. Sutherland also believes that creating these relationships using art therapy youth will have a huge difference in their life and

over all well-being. These connections youth establish through the art, their cognitive and social development increase even when adversity is faced.

Sutherland says, “the second primary goal in the ATC program is to model and teach useful emotional regulation, anger management, and coping skills for real-life problems in order to encourage responsible and positive behavior” (p. 72). Youth in the intergenerational poverty cycle need emotional awareness, and a connection when discovering their story in life. An example of this would be an art directive approach in the program where, “students are encouraged to express their emotions on a wall covered in paper in each of the art therapy rooms” (p. 71). These walls being covered in work the students have a safe space to show what has been troubling them in their current situations (Sutherland, 2010). When creating these walls Sutherland stated that students, are required to follow four basic rules when drawing on the wall, especially because the wall is not entirely private. The rules are “(a) do not sign your name on or write anyone else’s name, (b) no swear or cuss words, (c) be respectful of other students work, and (d) no gang signs or symbols” (p. 71). Having the wall for the youth, ATC therapist believed it was a great way for students to decrease bad behaviors which youth participated in before the program.

To break the cycle of intergenerational poverty the use of emotional awareness and storytelling is important. In Sutherlands article, the art directive approach which encourages students socially is Draw a Road. Draw a Road is where students are to complete a drawing of a road which can best represent oneself if you were that road. After completing the drawing of the road youth participated in discussions with a reflection (Sutherland, 2010). The questions were “where is this road coming from?”, “where is this road going?”, “how will you get there?”, “who is going with you?”, “how long will it take”, and “what will you find when you get there”

(Sutherland p. 72). Having participated in this experiential, the youth are able to understand their own self-worth, participate in community enhancement, understand the metaphorical outlook on their drawings, and provide social skills which will help them develop to look toward the future (Sutherland, 2010). Emotional awareness and finding a connection to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty is important. Using different art therapy intervention methods like the ones Art Therapy Connection have created can give youth a sense of belonging.

A client's background story is considered a huge portion and reasoning as to why people in the intergenerational poverty cycle participate in Art therapy programs. According to Potash (2019), "the clients' socioeconomic situations are compounded by a range of social factors including systemic poverty and racism" (p. 174). Art therapist must have an open mind when paying attention to different backgrounds, and cultures (Potash, 2019). Working with adolescents and youth, Goldner claims art therapist deal with "dramatic, cognitive, emotional, social, and physical changes accompanied by significant alterations in self-representations, and social networks" (Potash, p. 25). In recent years art therapy has become popular with youth. Art therapies popularity relates to creativity, self-expression, and developmental achievements. Youth experiencing the effects of the intergenerational poverty cycle have a challenge when going through the notion of art therapy (Wallace-DiGarbo, 2006). While experiencing the intergenerational poverty cycle, risk factors that youth may encounter are mental health issues, struggles in school, family dynamic issues, psychoactive abuse, and breaking the law (Wallace-DiGarbo, 2006).

Youth who go through these experiences that participate in these art therapy practices typically connect to the unconscious and create something completely different from their reality. Connecting to these unconscious and other realities is important so they could understand

the process of art therapy in its full capacity (Wallace-DiGarbo, 2006). According to Wallace-DiGarbo (2006), “it was hypothesized that the intervention program would improve the participants’ agency in their world as measured by the following dimensions of functioning: (a) family adjustment, (b) psychological adjustment, (c) peer influence, (d) school adjustment, (e) deviancy, and (f) attitude” (p.120). When participating in art therapy, the process was also taking account towards the idea of youth experiencing community engagement as artist in grown up settings.

The open studio process was adopted in the year of 1991 and was created for the sole intention to create art and establish community engagement. The Open Studio Process Inc. was developed by three well known Artists in the Chicago area (Block, 2005). While spending a year working within the community these artists believed that there was a need for some sort of arts program that would positively impact at-risk youth (Block 2005). Block claims that “according to an Evanston United Way Community assessment report, (United Way of Evanston, 2002) afterschool programming is a great need and is an area of concern” (p.32). This lack of afterschool programming affected young tweens ages ranging from 10 to 12 years old (Block, 2005).

The Open Studio Process Inc. has focuses which are intentional art making, witness-writing, discussing the work, and participation that is not forced upon students. These focuses are unique enough for students to help them with their own learning capabilities and understand their personal stories and traumas. A primary factor of the Open Studio Process is to help at-risk youth understand the process of creativity and the versatile use of art making as an outlet for self-expression. Once a week for nine to twelve weeks out of the year, a group of students meet up to express their stories in an art therapy group (Block, 2005). These students can free themselves

from their communities, homelife, and develop their own stories using images and or other creative art processes (Block, 2005). According to Block (2005), the Open Studio Process “is a space where it is okay to get paint on the walls and floor, it is a safe open place to be creative” (p. 33). When looking at their artworks and progress, the witnessing and discussing of the artwork allowed the youth to be non-judgmental with one another, as well as helping them see a story being developed behind someone who was experiencing similar life situations (Block, 2005). Not only is witnessing and creating an important process behind the OSP art therapist, and mentors create alongside the participants in an artist-in-residence model. There is absolutely no critiquing or commenting on anyone’s artwork while in the studio. This process adopted by the open studio practice model provides a positive yet meaningful way for youth to understand their own life stories, as well as issues along with the story which can eventually be an answer and or call for help down the road (Block, 2005). The open studio process is flexible to help with different types of populations and works to empower everyone different types of socioeconomic backgrounds (Block, 2005).

Working with at risk youth with the use of the Open Studio Process resulted in the youth establishing a sense of self-esteem. Gaining this confidence gave youth the opportunity to be seen and heard as well as appreciated by their peers, family, and other people in their respective communities (Block, 2005). At risk youth typically receive attention in other forms resulting from problems, and or difficult issues they may be experiencing. Working in the open studio process gives these youth the option to receive attention as an artist rather than troubled youth. Typically, the open studio process is well known for troubled tweens who are from a difficult background, and violent environments. Coming from these different background experiences, and environments, the open studio process is helpful to youth who have difficulty expressing

emotions in any way. When in the open studio, the young teens participating have the safe space to explore as well as reveal their stories at their own pace. Typically, when expressing and telling their stories, adolescents have the tendency to express to the world how screwed up it is. For youth using the open studio process “Art therapy in a social action context combines art and therapy with a commitment to social responsibility” (Block, p.37).

Art Therapy Interventions

Art is a method for people of all ages to tell a story and establish a meaning when working in groups or by oneself. Creating art is a form of communication that can be effective yet meaningful. Using different social and cultural practices can be based on community outreach programs, while understanding relationships between art and reality. Heise (2011), claims that the “social activist approach to community art [is used in] art education to address the community” (p. 326). While creating art, pre-teens can explore the differences of verbal and nonverbal expression while participating therapeutic setting. Expressive arts therapies are beneficial since it provides different methods of communication, and the art connects to the unconscious which eventually surfaces to a level that can be eventually discussed. When connecting to the unconscious and having these discussions according to Perryman (2015), “art therapy groups can become a place to work through disconnections and form new social connections in a way that promotes self-growth” (p. 208).

Having art therapy as an intervention tool can be used as a therapeutic approach to decrease mental health issues, and traumas. Art therapy can be used in many different intervention methods. Examples of this are, helping tweens who suffer from incompetent social skills, art therapy being implemented in lower socioeconomic schools to incorporate an increase in learning, promote active approaches to counseling, and help students suffering from anxiety

focusing in on self-confidence and awareness. Using art therapy to help at-risked youth can increase a sense of resilience, have a large impact in the classroom at school, and decrease the amount of students dropping out of school.

Typically, art therapy is used as an intervention method that is combined into a larger issue dealing with cognitive-behavioral interventions such as scheduling, and or pleasant activities. This intervention method can be a support system for youth with any sort of mental health issues. Losinski (2016) claims, “increasing the frequency of pleasant activities and positive interactions with the environment can result in significant improvement in depressive symptoms” (p. 27). When working with young teens experiencing trauma, or have gone through a traumatic event, therapist can use art therapy to help the client process the story. Art therapy can be used as a positive approach for children and tweens because it gives them the opportunity to explore and create certain feelings, and thoughts without talking, and or consequences of the trauma involved. When using art therapy as an intervention tool, the main concept is not evaluating the product of the art instead it is focusing on the therapeutic process behind the creation of the work, and self-expression for the client. Through the process of both talking, and creative interactions with clients, using the creative process of self-expression in a therapeutic approach helps youth form a sense of expression through verbal and nonverbal communication

Youth and Art Programs

All art programs incorporate the techniques of form, meaning, and value when determining the creative process behind the meaning of the piece. At any age group it is a huge factor to understand the conceptual meaning behind art, but specifically age groups where art is being taught art in diverse settings. Over the course of the past twenty years counseling practitioners have increased their research on expressive art techniques and different

interventions with all types of populations. Specifically, the population of youth have become a huge part of this research to increase the learning of expressive art techniques. According to research, counselors have found that youth who are faced with adversity or the struggles of everyday life typically turn to expressive arts as a coping mechanism.

Having community art programs for youth is very impactful, but especially for youth at risk since they are suffering from trauma such as intergenerational poverty and exposure to traumatic events. A study was created to help youth suffering from these events. In this program, the focus was to provide children with exploration of art materials in a positive manner. The youth in this study were a part of the homeless population in an emergency homeless shelter in the southeastern United States. Within the homeless shelter a six-week program was established to help the children and mothers have a purpose and sense of community. Heise (2011) states, “participants [ranged from] five to thirteen years old” [and were paired] in groups from ages five to eight and nine to thirteen” (p. 326). Many of the children participating in the art program suffered from violence, neglect, and abuse from their families, and the environment surrounding the tweens.

When conducting the study, Heise recorded the responses of the youth’s verbal and nonverbal responses to the art making process. The art program had a curriculum which used the process of individualization and collective approaches to understand the process of protection, dependency on oneself, and establishing a personal narrative. Guiding and facilitating these sessions a guide was established to help the youth understand their personal narrative, and creative process (Heise, 2011). The questions asked by Heise (2011) included “Who am I? Who can we be? What makes us strong?; What protects us?; and Who are we?” (p. 327). Results of Heise’s study showed the using these questions and art materials given, the diverse answers from

the youth were encouraging and gave them all a sense of voice. When participating in these art programs the homeless youth created their own visual story which represented their life. These stories were used through the method of two-dimensional, and three-dimensional works by cutting and creating shapes with foam material, clay works, and sculpted environments.

Developing these creations, three characteristics had become a common theme within each of the homeless youth's artwork. According to Heise (2011), these themes were "physical signs of engagement, art creation and pride in these activities, and positive attitude" (p. 328). As a result, the program in the homeless shelter showed a positive impact in the community for academic success, community engagement, a nurturing environment, and a place for youth to express themselves and tell their story in a safe, and reliable place.

Another group study was performed for at risked African American youth ages 7-12 using the expressive arts therapy as a coping method. These youth came from the homes of parents who suffered from drug and alcohol addictions. The tweens participated in the study for eight weeks in total and studied different art activities which were culturally based on their own race. Examples of these expressive art activities included mask making, storytelling, and African dance. During the meeting which took place for a total of eight weeks, each group met for a 2-hour basis typically after school in a community center in the heart of the inner city in an urban neighborhood. When participating in these meetings self-expression, self-worth, coping mechanisms and communication techniques were developed as a result for the growth in these pre-teens. According to Gociochea (2014), "children tend to be more at ease when creating something, expressive interventions also facilitate rapport" (p.69).

To portray the success for youth in art programs, a study was established. *The Evaluation of a Colorful Life* a study by Leung was based off Lev-Wiesel and Liraz's study from 2007. This

study showed that drawings created a sense of a better narrative for children ages 9-12 to understand the effects behind the trauma at home while suffering from fathers who were addicted to drugs. These drawings overall helped the pre-teens reveal their emotions and feelings towards their home life. The study by Leung was developed for preteens and parents suffering from addiction in the city of Hong Kong. The expressive arts therapy approach was to help the youth and parents discover the effects of youth development in a more positive outlook. Using art therapy, the parents who suffered from addictions were able to express their own emotions and talk about their own experiences with their children. Having the parents participate in this study was also important so that the therapist could help provide parenting approaches to help support and uplift their adolescents. Results from this study showed that after participating in the art therapy sessions parents changed their beliefs towards their children and started to redirect their parenting skills, while children started to understand the meaning behind their parent's addiction.

Another method for youth in art programs that could be beneficial is incorporating art breaks into any method of clinical counseling and or therapy. The use of these art breaks is to help youth understand the concepts and approaches of positive psychology, creating art, and intervention methods for cognitive behavioral issues. Using these art breaks, youth can create visual art projects like mandalas, simple or complex drawings and paintings. Creating these visual art works can overall help the youth's creative mindset, and self-expression (Losinski, 2016)

Conclusion

Across the board, art therapy can be used as an intervention tool to help those living through the cycle of intergenerational poverty. Intergenerational poverty is a cycle that remains consistent in our society today. Youth all over the world, but particularly those in the United States endure this cycle due to addictions in families such as alcoholism and drugs, low socioeconomic communities, as well as struggling in school. To break the cycle of intergenerational poverty society must provide programs such as expressive arts for the youth, therapy, as well as interventions. To conclude, art therapy is a proven intervention method for youth living in the intergenerational poverty cycle. This is because youth can connect with others, tell their stories, and provide a non-judgmental agency, as well as self-expression. Based on literature being from the past, this topic needs to continue to be researched as well as preformed for the cycle of intergenerational poverty to improve. For this topic, to have current research, longitudinal studies, interviews, and current literature needs to be published.

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Appendix A



Pieces of Glass and Hope, 12x10 piece of metal, three-dimensional sculpture with bottles, metal rods, and broken pieces of glass. This was made through the fall semester of 2022 and put on display November 29, 2022.

