

A pilot randomised controlled study of arts therapies in primary schools in the UK: the effects on children's quality of life, life functioning, wellbeing, and sleep.

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Background

Over recent decades there has been a change in the way schooling is perceived, recognizing that children's learning is closely linked to their health. Children spend most of their time at school, which is often where problems are identified, and interventions can be offered both for prevention and treatment. Embedding arts therapies in schools can address children's emerging needs and improve their wellbeing.

Methods

A pilot cross-over randomised controlled design was employed to investigate the effectiveness of an arts therapies intervention (including art, music, drama, and dance movement therapy) on a series of child- and teacher-reported outcome measures, specifically, health related quality of life (assessed using a HRQOL scale; EQ-5D-Y), wellbeing and life functioning (assessed using the child outcome rating scale; CORS), emotional and behavioural difficulties (assessed using the strengths and difficulties questionnaire; SDQ), as well as duration of sleep (assessed using Fitbits). Sample size calculations for future large-scale studies were also performed, and the sustained impact of the intervention was evaluated at three, six and twelve months follow-up. Participants were 62 children with mild emotional and behavioural difficulties.

Results

Improvements in HRQOL and CORS were greater in those engaged in the arts therapies intervention than the control groups and were maintained at the follow-up stages. Significant improvements were only found for duration of sleep ($P = 0.002$) and SDQ ($P = 0.008$). Minimal

clinically important differences (MCIDs) were found for CORS, SDQ and duration of sleep, but not HRQOL.

Discussion

Arts therapies were having a clinically significant effect on life functioning, duration of sleep, emotional and behavioural difficulties, and a small effect size for quality of life. All outcomes assessed would be suitable for inclusion in a larger randomized controlled study and a sample size of 225 participants would be required if these outcome measures were used.

Biography

Zoe Moula is a lecturer in mental health at King's College London, and former Research Fellow at Imperial College and University College London. Her research is focused on the impact of arts therapies and arts-in-nature on children and young people's wellbeing and connection with nature. Zoe is a member of the Steering Committee of the Arts, Health and Wellbeing Group at the Royal Society for Public Health, and the Lead Editor of the Routledge-commissioned book titled 'Arts in nature and outdoor spaces for children and young people: A guide towards health equity, wellbeing, and sustainability'. Zoe is also the Editor-in-Chief Designate at the *International Journal of Art Therapy* (IJAT).

Recent publications and conference presentations

Moula Z, Walshe N, Lee E. (2023). **“It was like I was not a person, it was like I was the nature”**: the impact of arts-in-nature experiences on the wellbeing of children living in areas of high deprivation. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 90, 102072.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2023.102072>

Moula Z. (2023). **Art therapy research within emergency shelters, military museums, secure care, schools, and communities** [Editorial]. *International Journal of Art Therapy*, 28(3), 94-96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17454832.2023.2242669>

Moula Z, Palmer K & Walshe N. (2022). **A systematic review of arts-based interventions delivered to children and young people in nature or outdoor spaces: impact on nature connectedness, health and wellbeing.** Special issue: Nature-based social prescriptions for improving health and wellbeing. *Frontiers in Psychology*. <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.858781/abstract>

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Moula Z, Powell J & Karkou V. (2021). **An investigation of the effectiveness of arts therapies interventions on measures of quality of life and wellbeing: A pilot randomised controlled study in primary schools.** Special issue: The psychological and physiological benefits of the arts. *Frontiers in Psychology*. [10.3389/fpsyg.2020.586134/full](https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.586134/full)