

A Review of Mandala Drawing Therapy in the Education of Children with Special Needs

Kaiyu Lu^{1,a}, Shuiping Jie¹, Haoyuan Shen^{1,b}, Xianglian Yu^{1,c,*}

¹Education College, Jiangnan University, Wuhan, China

^a1006218340@qq.com, ^bpsy_shy@stu.jhun.edu.cn, ^cpsyyu@jhun.edu.cn

*Corresponding author

Abstract: Exceptional children's education is an educational approach designed to meet the learning and developmental needs of the exceptional children. Various therapies are widely used in the field of exceptional children's education, among which Mandala Painting Therapy, as an integrative therapy combining the art of painting and psychotherapy, is able to help exceptional children overcome difficulties and achieve comprehensive development. This review will explore the definition, principles and effects of mandala drawings therapy in the education of exceptional children. Mandala painting therapy has a positive effect on emotional regulation, cognitive development and social ability of children with special needs, etc. There are fewer studies on the application of mandala painting therapy in the field of education of children with special needs in China, this paper reviews the advantages and shortcomings of mandala drawings as an aid to the education of children with special needs, and makes a corresponding outlook on the future development.

Keywords: exceptional children's education; mandala painting; Children with special needs

1. Introduction

As an important part of national education, special education not only concerns the well-being and educational rights of the 85 million persons with disabilities, but is also an important indicator of the Party's education policy, reflecting the overall strength of Chinese education and the degree of civilisation in society. The development of special education in China started late and had weak foundations, but with the State's emphasis on special education and the promulgation and implementation of relevant systems, special education in China has developed at a high speed since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), and a special education placement model and special education system for children with special needs has been formed with Chinese local characteristics. During the Thirteenth Five-Year Plan period, the compulsory education enrolment rate for children with disabilities will reach more than 95 per cent (according to the 14 September 2023 China Education News). However, special education is characterized by a great deal of diversity, variety and complexity, there is almost no ready-made model that can be directly copied, whether it is the placement of children with special needs, the curriculum and teaching, etc., and a lot of preconceived models are far from being able to solve the new problems that children with special needs frequently encounter in the actual environment (Zhao Bin, 2023).

Mandala is a circular geometric pattern commonly used in Buddhist and Hindu religious practices to represent a visual expression of the universe. Mandala painting, on the other hand, refers to the process of painting within a given spatial dimension for self-expression (Chan Chan Rui, 2014). Mandala painting is an expressive art therapy technique that assesses the mental health of the painter through the colours, lines and imagery of the mandala painting. Modern psychologist Jung used and developed mandala painting therapy in psychotherapy and promoted it as a unique tool for spiritual expression and healing. It is now widely used in psychotherapy and assessment (Chan Chan Rui, 2013).

Mandala painting can provide a creative expression that can be used in conjunction with other appropriate teaching methods and therapeutic strategies to promote the holistic development of children with special needs. Mandala drawing therapy has been found to be helpful in treating psychiatric and psychological disorders such as childhood autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, schizophrenia, and post-traumatic stress disorder, and it improves coping skills and resilience in adolescents at risk of psychological problems (YINGYING XIN 2022, KAMI CHEN 2022, VERMILION J 2019, SIMPSON H 2020).

Painting therapy has been applied to the early intervention of children with special needs in developed countries in the West, but its application in the field of psychotherapy in China is still relatively small and lacks relevant theoretical research[1-8].

2. Conceptual and theoretical basis of mandala painting therapy

Mandala Art Therapy is a combination of Western psychotherapy and Eastern philosophy. Mandala means "circle" in Sanskrit and refers to a specific, very orderly figure, usually presented as a central point or destination surrounded by concentric circles. In the 1920s and 1930s, Carl Jung, the founder of the school of psychoanalysis, introduced mandala paintings, which were used in Buddhist practices, into the field of Western psychology and applied them in psychotherapy (Chen Canrui 2014). Jung discovered that the mandala, as an archetypal schema, could connect to our inner forces through its mysterious geometric structure, energy and colours, creating a powerful circle of energy that allows for the spontaneous expression of our subconscious mind. Advocated by Jung and other psychologists, mandala painting has gradually become an important form of psychotherapy (Chan Chan Rui, 2013).

In addition, mandala painting therapy benefits from Buddhist philosophy. In Buddhist thought, a mandala is a graphic used to aid meditation and is designed to help people return to a state of inner peace. By drawing a mandala, focusing and combining its details and colours, participants can relax and enter a state of deep contemplation and meditation. In this state, people can get mindful of meditation, which leads to self-exploration and self-awareness (Hu Jie, 2020).

3. Characteristics and needs of the education of children with special needs

3.1 Classification and characteristics of children with special needs

Exceptional children are usually defined as children who are significantly different from the general population in terms of intelligence, ability, emotion, and physical and mental development. The Americans with Disabilities Education Act (ADEA) classifies exceptional children as having learning disabilities, speech or language impairments, intellectual disabilities, physical sensory impairments, and learning disabilities. The reason why children with special needs are considered a special group is that they have obvious differences from normal children in physical and psychological aspects. Not only are the physical and mental characteristics of exceptional children very different from those of normal children, there are also great differences between different types of exceptional children. Analysed in terms of psychological characteristics, most of the exceptional children have strong self-consciousness, no group integration ability, difficulties in normal communication with others, distraction in class, and some exceptional children are very excluded from the classroom classroom, are often in the mental state of anger, tension and anxiety, and are easily affected by the external environment and have poor emotional stability (Chen Meng, 2023).

3.2 Needs of exceptional children in education

3.2.1 Survival needs

Owing to congenital defects, various kinds of external insecurity and other disturbances, children with special needs have a far greater need for realistic and value-based survival than ordinary children. However, as a result of the pursuit of value pluralism in today's society, when people are keen to explore the various values of education, they gradually forget the original value of education and dilute their thinking about the survival of children with special needs in specific environments[9-15].

3.2.2 Development needs

In 2021, the "14th Five-Year Plan of Action for the Development and Enhancement of Exceptional Education" proposed to promote self-esteem, self-confidence, self-improvement and self-reliance of children and adolescents with disabilities, and to help them realise their maximum development, and to grow up to be useful talents of the country. The fundamental characteristic of education is human, and the fundamental purpose of education is to enable a person to become the best version of himself or herself, i.e., to constantly discover himself or herself, become himself or herself, and develop himself or herself (Mao Hongfang, 2018). Maximum development is the starting point and destination of all educational activities, and it is the value purpose of exceptional children's education. However, research has found that exceptional children have a low level of development of moral cognition, moral emotion,

psychological theory, etc., and may show characteristics such as low self-esteem, impulsiveness, stubbornness, etc., in terms of their personality, emotions, and behaviours, and may even break the law and discipline. The starting point of development of children with special needs is lower than that of ordinary children to varying degrees, and in order to minimise the obstacles brought about by disabilities to their growth, all the work on moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic, and labour should be done in a fuller and more detailed manner than that of ordinary children (Xu Tianxi, 2023).

4. Advantages of applying mandala drawing therapy in the education of exceptional children

First of all, compared with ordinary children, it is more difficult for children with special needs to express themselves verbally, mandala painting as an expressive art therapy technique, the size of the painting, the lightness of the brush, the spatial configuration, the colours, the composition and so on have specific symbolic significance, which is more capable of conveying the information that children with special needs want to express (Tong Haijing, 2018). Secondly, mandala painting therapy has non-verbal qualities, directly using images to establish a connection with the imagery, so it is applicable to patients of different ages and different types of diseases, there is no mandatory, fixed implementation of the location requirements, for the mentally deficient, young children, loss of verbal function, etc. can accept this approach. Again, in the process of exceptional children's education, the process of mandala painting is equivalent to a game, exceptional children can participate in it more easily, reduce the defensive psychology, so as to effectively establish a good relationship with the therapist; finally, mandala painting can enable children with aggressive behaviour to express their feelings of anger, hostility and these feelings in a rational way. A study used a case-by-case method to conduct drawing therapy with two children with aggressive behaviour, and found that children with the same aggressive behaviour may have different underlying reasons for their aggressive behaviour, and the mandala projection drawing technique can help children express their different inner conflicts and contradictions, and help them in a more targeted way while identifying the underlying reasons (Chen Kun, 2007). Children with special needs are able to positively influence their emotional, social and linguistic aspects by virtue of the protective integrative intention that the mandala itself has in the process of mandala painting (Claire M, 2017).

5. The use of mandala drawing therapy in the education of children with special needs

Many developed countries have applied mandala painting therapy to the treatment and early intervention of children with emotional and behavioural problems, children with disabilities and children with organic diseases. In China, there is less theory and practice in this area, mainly focusing on the following kinds of research.

5.1 The use of mandala painting in the education of autistic children

Autism is a kind of generalised developmental disorder in children, and these children have different degrees of verbal developmental disorders, narrow interests and other problems. Mandala painting, as a special form of painting, can not only help children with autism express their inner feelings through non-verbal forms, and the consistency of mandala painting is also compatible with the psychological preference for consistency and sense of order of children with autism, so it is easier for children to accept and focus on painting, and to enhance their painting ability (Lu Xiaoping, 2017). Meanwhile, the most typical imagery of selfhood in mandala, its outer circle symbolises the protective drive of selfhood. Children with autism have a higher need for protection than ordinary children, and the protective effect of mandala painting and the warm flavour it brings, which is full of maternal meanings, can effectively stimulate the self-nature and other functions, and enhance the children's ability to cope with difficulties and behavioural ability (Li Jiaojiao, 2021). In an experiment to investigate the effect of mandala painting therapy on the psychological function and behavioural level of children with autism, it was also proved that the application of mandala painting therapy can significantly enhance the psychological function and improve the behavioural level of children with autism (Tingting Liu, 2022).

5.2 The use of mandala painting for children with autism

Autism is a common neurodevelopmental disorder in children, which usually manifests itself in narrow interests, social interaction disorders, and communication disorders. Some studies have pointed out. Mandala painting has a good assessment and intervention effect on the severity of children's autism,

and can be applied to the psychological assessment and intervention of autistic children. It is found that the higher the severity of autistic children's illness, the less obvious their mandala painting characteristics are, and the more serious the corresponding loneliness symptoms are, indicating that mandala painting has a good assessment of the severity of children's autism; and the case study shows that mandala painting has a good intervention efficacy for autistic children (Chen Canrui, 2013). Mandala painting is a new type of modern psychotherapy, which is able to externalise children's psychology through characteristic spiritual expression, and its painting composition rules match children's psychological characteristics, which can stimulate children's self-protective function and integration ability. At the same time, autistic children lack the ability of integration and unity in their hearts, while the "symmetry" rule in mandala painting is the embodiment of the eternal balance state, which can express the unity of all opposites; due to the poor integration ability of the children, it is difficult for them to connect the semantics and meanings, and they can feel the favourable influence of the integrated imagery of the mandala paintings through continuous painting, which is beneficial to their own emotions. This is beneficial to the children's own emotional, linguistic, and social dimensions (Ge Xiangling, 2023).

5.3 The use of mandala painting in the education of mentally handicapped children

Intellectually disabled children are a group of children whose individual level of intellectual development is significantly lower than that of normal people due to various factors, and they know things mainly by intuitive thinking, and they are more likely to appreciate intuitive materials and familiar representations of things. Some studies have shown that fine arts art therapy is used to treat the psychology of children with intellectual disabilities and to compensate for the deficiencies expected to have a positive impact on the growth and improvement of the student's relevant abilities [lower grades] (Hao Zhenjun, 2004). Among the many art therapies, mandala drawing therapy is one of the extremely unique ones. Mandala drawing therapy is a therapy that combines art and psychotherapy, which can play an active role in children's education, especially for children with intellectual disabilities. Mandala drawing therapy encourages children to express their inner feelings and emotions through drawing. For mentally challenged children, who may have difficulty in expressing themselves accurately in words, drawing can be an effective way of communication. Through mandala drawing, they can freely express their emotions and thoughts, enhancing their self-confidence and sense of personal identity. Secondly, children with mental retardation usually have problems with concentration, and mandala painting requires children to focus their attention on the painting process. By drawing complex geometric patterns, children need to focus on every detail, which helps to improve their concentration and ability to concentrate. Thirdly, mandala drawing requires children to construct and design geometric shapes, which helps them develop spatial perception and geometric thinking. Through observation, analysis and decision-making during the drawing process, they can develop their problem-solving skills and creativity [16-22].

6. Problems and shortcomings of mandala drawing therapy in the process of intervention and treatment of exceptional children

Painting, as a non-verbal tool, has many advantages in the education of children with special needs that cannot be matched by other modalities. Mandala as a special form of painting, in addition to the ordinary mechanism of painting therapy can be achieved, there is a unique mechanism of action. At present, China's mandala painting therapy in exceptional children's education is still in its infancy, and there are still many problems in the research of mandala painting therapy that are unclear and need to be solved urgently.

6.1 Lack of specialisation of operators

The requirements for operators in Mandala Painting Therapy are very high, not only do they need to have the theoretical foundation and practical experience in psychology, and be able to master and operate the diagnosis and assessment techniques for children with special needs, but they also need to have a certain degree of understanding of the art of painting, and go through professional training in painting psychoanalysis. In practice, those who are engaged in painting therapy for exceptional children mainly include teachers of special education, parents, and some art professionals who are enthusiastic about the rehabilitation therapy for exceptional children, and most of them lack the knowledge of psychological diagnosis and assessment and the ability to operate, and have not been trained systematically to master the painting therapy techniques. The main reason for this is that there is still a lack of specialised

institutions to train painting therapy professionals in most areas of China.

6.2 Lack of standardisation of operational processes

One of the advantages of the drawing therapy process is that the process is relatively arbitrary and free, and it is also because of this advantage that the process of drawing therapy cannot be standardised. Like sand tray therapy, most of the standards for interpreting the content of painting refer to foreign research results, and there is no uniform and clear standard in China [23-25].

6.3 Impact assessment is prone to bias

Firstly, the assessment of the effectiveness of drawing therapy is usually carried out by the therapist alone. However, the therapist's assessment is susceptible to the influence of previous information as well as the therapist's subjective factors. Secondly, mandala painting therapy belongs to painting therapy, and at present, China has not yet formed a specialised assessment model for painting therapy, due to the fact that painting therapy was first applied to the field of psychological counselling, in the current assessment of painting therapy, most of them draw on the model of psychological assessment. (Wang Yu 2015)

7. Summarization and prospect

In recent years, mandala painting, as an emerging psychological therapy, has great advantages in the education of children with special needs: mandala painting is not only conducive to the enhancement of non-verbal and creative expression of children with special needs, but also helps them regulate their emotions through the process of painting and promotes the development of self-cognition and social interactions, thus enhancing their mental health and comprehensive quality. In the future, as the society's concern and attention to children with special needs continues to grow, mandala painting therapy will be more widely promoted and applied in the education of children with special needs. At the same time, with the development of science and technology, digital mandala drawing tools will also be gradually popularised, providing a more convenient and effective way of treatment for children with special needs.

At the same time, mandala painting therapy in the field of exceptional children's education also has problems such as the lack of relevant professionals, the lack of standardised references in the treatment process, and the large deviation in the evaluation of the corresponding treatment effects. In conclusion, the use of mandala painting therapy in the education of children with special needs has its scientific validity and feasibility, but due to the fact that mandala painting therapy originated from the West, it started late in China, so there is still much room for exploration and development.

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