ART THERAPY AS A MODALITY FOR CRISIS INTERVENTION: CHILDREN EXPRESS REACTIONS TO VIOLENCE IN THEIR COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT: Ten days after the Symbionese Liberation Army's "shoot out" in Los Angeles in 1974, the Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, Department of Family Child Psychiatry, Thalians Community Mental Health Center, sent a crisis team of three psychotherapists to a school in the black community. The psychotherapists used an art therapy approach with a third grade classroom of 21 black children. The team's procedure helped the children ventilate their reactions to a frightening event which occurred in their neighborhood. This paper describes the art therapy techniques which were utilized, the children's vivid pictorial and verbal expressions accompanied by the psychological aspects of their responses.

Headlines from the Los Angeles Times, Saturday, May 18, 1974: SUSPECTED SLA HIDEOUT STORMED, 5 DIE, FIRE DESTROYS HOUSE, VICTIMS BURNED BEYOND RECOGNITION, 500 LAW OFFICERS JOIN IN 2-HOUR BATTLE IN SOUTH L.A.

Five hundred law officers stormed a suspected hideout of the terrorist Symbionese Liberation Army in South-Central Los Angeles Friday and five occupants died in the battle. The house was destroyed by flames.

The furious gunfight began at 5:50 p.m. and lasted almost two hours. Thousands of rounds of ammunition sprayed the air and at least seven cannisters of tear gas were fired.

On May 27, 1974, ten days after the Symbionese Liberation Army shoot-out in Los Angeles, Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, Department of Child Psychiatry, Thalians Community Mental Health Center, sent a crisis team out into the community, consisting of an art therapist and two clinical social workers, which used art therapy as a therapeutic modality with twenty-one black children in a third grade classroom. The school was located several miles from the scene of violence.
The Consultation-Education Section of the Department of Psychiatry made the initial contacts with the school principal. The efforts were presented as an opportunity to help children express their reactions and responses to the shoot-out. The principal was receptive to the intervention and prepared the teacher for our visit.

The subjective impression of the teacher's response was that the team was viewed as visitors or resource people. The format was discussed with her and she was invited to participate if she wished. She chose to observe the experience rather than to be active.

The therapists introduced themselves to the class as people who help children and their families with their troubles. They proceeded to explain how the students, by sharing their feelings regarding certain events which happened in Los Angeles, could help each other learn to express feelings and could help the therapists understand more about how children feel.

The class of twenty-one children was divided into three groups, with each group seated around a square table with crayons and paper placed in front of each child.

The art therapist gave a short blackboard demonstration on how feelings can be communicated through line and form. Emphasis was placed on the expression of feelings rather than the art itself. Assurance was given on the acceptability of everyone's endeavor.

The children were given a "warm-up art exercise." Each child was asked to print his or her initials, large, on the paper. Then students were encouraged to discover pictures and designs suggested by their initials. At first the children hesitated to explore their creativity. Perhaps this was due to a new classroom situation where strangers intruded upon their usual routine. The students' reservations were revealed through the picture titles such as "A Snow Lady," or "Monsters from Outer Space." When the exercise was completed, the children eagerly shared their art visually and verbally. Then one of the social workers said, "An unusual event happened here in Los Angeles two weeks ago on 54th Street..." With the sentence still unfinished, chaos reigned. The boys and girls all spoke at once, their faces and bodies reacting as though a bomb had been dropped in the room. Many children filled in with "yeah, and Compton Avenue," proceeding to spew out the details of the Symbionese Liberation Army shoot-out.

Immediate Responses by the Children

The therapists encouraged the children to draw what they were feeling. Tightly held crayons attacked the paper with quick and jabbing motions as bullet-riddled and burning houses, trees on fire, shooting, people screaming for help, and dead bodies took shape on the pages. 