

Chapter # 2

ART THERAPY IN THE CONTEXT OF SPECIAL EDUCATION: A STUDY OF BULGARIAN PSYCHOLOGISTS' ATTITUDES

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ABSTRACT

This book chapter examines the application of art therapy as a supportive approach when working with children with special educational needs (SEN). As part of the study, a survey was conducted with psychologists working with children with SEN in various educational and therapeutic institutions. The aim of the study is to analyze the attitudes, professional experience and perceptions of specialists regarding the benefits and challenges associated with the use of art therapy in this context. The results show a positive attitude towards art therapy as an effective tool for emotional, cognitive and social support of children, but also highlight a number of practical difficulties related to the lack of resources, specialized training and systemic support. Possibilities for a wider introduction of art therapy practices in the field of special education are discussed.

Keywords: art therapy, inclusive education, special educational needs (SEN), psychologists, attitudes, perceptions, therapeutic practices.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, art therapy has become increasingly recognised as a valuable modality for supporting children with special educational needs (SEN). Through creative expression – such as drawing, modelling, music, movement, and drama – children can externalise emotions, enhance communication, and build self-awareness and self-confidence. Art therapy provides a safe, non-verbal space that supports emotional regulation and cognitive growth, often complementing pedagogical and clinical interventions (Councill, 2016; Malchiodi, 2018; Rubin, 2016). In the context of special education, art therapy not only complements traditional pedagogical and therapeutic methods, but also offers individualized support tailored to the specifics of each child.

In Bulgaria, the development of inclusive education has progressed rapidly since the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2008). Yet, despite the growing emphasis on creative and holistic approaches, art therapy remains underrepresented in mainstream educational practice (Mihaylova, 2017). Few schools employ trained art therapists, and psychological professionals often integrate art-based techniques informally. Consequently, the practice lacks systematic evaluation, professional training pathways, and clear institutional recognition.

Psychologists play a crucial role in implementing inclusive education. Their attitudes toward art therapy directly influence its effectiveness and integration into daily practice. Understanding these attitudes is particularly relevant in the Bulgarian context, where

systemic, cultural, and educational factors shape the accessibility of therapeutic interventions for children with SEN.

Aim and research questions:

This study aims to analyze psychologists' attitudes towards art therapy in the context of inclusive education in Bulgaria. Specifically, it explores:

- How psychologists perceive the benefits and challenges of using art therapy with children with SEN;
- What art therapy techniques are most frequently employed and viewed as effective;
- What barriers prevent wider implementation of art therapy practices in educational settings.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research Design

A descriptive, mixed-methods research design was adopted to explore psychologists' attitudes towards art therapy in inclusive education. Quantitative data were collected through structured survey questions, while qualitative insights were gathered from open-ended responses. This approach provided both measurable trends and contextual understanding of professional perspectives.

2.2. Participants

The study involved 30 practising psychologists working in educational, therapeutic, and counselling settings with children with special educational needs (SEN) in Bulgaria. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. The majority of respondents were women (90%), aged between 30 and 49 years, and held a Master's degree in psychology (83.3%).

Participants were drawn from schools, private therapy centres, and inclusive education teams across the country. They represented varying levels of professional experience, from early career psychologists to specialists with over 20 years of practice.

2.3. Instruments

Data were collected through two online questionnaires distributed via Google Forms — one designed for parents and another for psychologists. The present analysis focuses exclusively on the second instrument: Exploring the Attitudes of Psychologists Using Art Therapy for Children with SEN.

The questionnaire included both closed-ended questions (multiple choice and Likert scales) and open-ended prompts exploring perceived benefits, challenges, and specific techniques used. The survey comprised 20 items organised into four thematic blocks:

1. Demographic and professional background;
2. Experience and use of art therapy;
3. Perceived effectiveness and challenges;
4. Recommendations and training needs.

The instrument was piloted with three psychologists to ensure clarity of wording and internal consistency.

2.4. Procedure

The survey was conducted electronically between May and July 2024. Respondents were invited via professional networks and educational institutions. Prior to participation, each respondent reviewed an informed consent statement outlining the voluntary nature of the study, confidentiality of responses, and data protection under EU GDPR (2018) standards.

2.5. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were processed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages). Qualitative responses were analysed through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) to identify recurring themes related to perceived challenges, professional needs, and recommendations for practice.

2.6. Ethical Considerations

All procedures complied with ethical standards of social science research. No identifying information was collected. Participants could withdraw at any point. As the study involved adult professionals and no vulnerable populations directly, institutional ethics approval was not required under Bulgarian regulations.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1. Definition and Principles of Art Therapy

Art therapy is a possibility to express the complex, contradictory nature of feelings, mental states, and the unique unity and wholeness that constitute the personality. The need to present them in the more impoverished, one-sided way offered by everyday language disappears, and this is accompanied by a lower level of tension associated with self-disclosure.” Art therapy is a psychotherapeutic practice that uses creative processes to promote mental, emotional, and social well-being. According to the British Association of Art Therapists (BAAT, 2025), art therapy facilitates self-expression and communication through artistic media, particularly for individuals unable to articulate emotions verbally. “The overall goal of its practitioners is to enable the change and growth on a personal level through the use of artistic materials in a safe and convenient environment”. Art therapy is a form of expression that opens the door to communication without verbal interaction (Emery, 2004).

It integrates principles from psychology, visual arts, and education. “Art therapy is based on the idea that the creative process of art making facilitates repair and recovery and is a form of nonverbal communication of thoughts and feelings. Like other forms of psychotherapy and counselling, it is used to encourage personal growth and has been employed in a wide variety of settings with children, adults, families, and groups.” (Malchiodi, 2018), grounded in both humanistic and developmental theories (Rubin, 2016).

3.2. Art Therapy and Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN)

International research highlights the efficacy of art therapy for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and other developmental conditions. It helps regulate behaviour, improve focus, and enhance emotional understanding (Jalambadani, 2020; Jianhua & Xiaolu, 2013). Studies also demonstrate improvements in fine motor coordination, cognitive flexibility, and social interaction through structured art-based interventions (Green & Drewes, 2022; Albert, 2010).

For children with SEN, art therapy can serve as a bridge between therapeutic and educational domains. It provides sensory experiences that help children manage anxiety, express trauma, and build self-efficacy (Lee & Peng, 2017; Lee & Liu, 2016; Freilich & Shechtman, 2010). Moreover, group art therapy fosters peer communication, empathy, and inclusion – key objectives of inclusive education.

3.3. The Bulgarian Context

The body of Bulgarian scholarly literature addressing the application of art therapy for children with special needs remains relatively limited (Bojadjieva & Gradinarova, 2016; Doychinova-Ivanova, 2025; Mihaylova, 2017). Their contributions remain largely conceptual and insufficiently supported by empirical evidence. The limited scope and theoretical nature of these works underscore the need for more rigorous, systematic research that evaluates therapeutic outcomes and provides a stronger scientific foundation for the application of art therapy within the Bulgarian context.

Consequently, the development of comprehensive studies that explore evidence-based methodologies, therapeutic outcomes, and culturally specific practices in art therapy is essential for advancing both academic understanding and professional practice in Bulgaria.

Despite the 2016 Pre-school and School Education Act promoting inclusive practices, art therapy is not formally integrated into public education or school counselling frameworks. Training opportunities for art therapy are sporadic and often private. The current study addresses this gap by presenting empirical data on psychologists' perspectives within this underexplored context.

3.4. Research Gap and Rationale

While art therapy is recognised internationally as a key component of expressive and inclusive education, no systematic study has yet explored how Bulgarian psychologists apply or perceive it in practice. Identifying professional attitudes and systemic barriers is essential to improving access, quality, and policy development in this field.

4. RESULTS

The results are organised thematically, combining quantitative data and qualitative insights. The tables and figures below summarise key findings.

4.1. Professional Experience

Most participants (30%) had between 1–5 years of experience, followed by 6–10 years and 16–20 years (20% each). This distribution suggests a balanced representation across career stages.

Table 1.
Professional experience of participating psychologists.

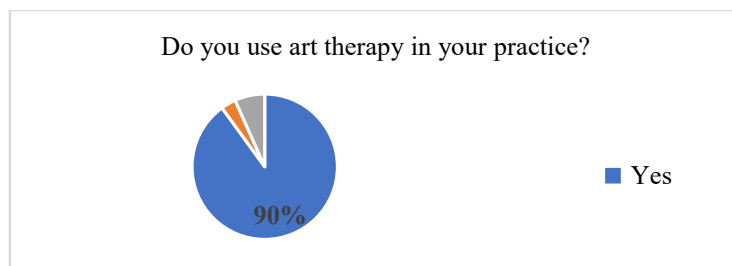
How long have you been practicing as a psychologist?	%
For 1 year	10%
1-5 years	30%
6-10 years	20%
11-15 years	13.3%
16-20 years	20%
Over 20 years	6.7%

4.2. Use of Art Therapy in Practice

When asked “Do you use art therapy in your practice?”, 90% of respondents reported doing so regularly. This indicates widespread familiarity and acceptance of art-based techniques among psychologists working with SEN (Figure 1).

Of the remaining participants, 6.7% used art therapy occasionally and 3.3% rarely. These professionals cited limited resources, insufficient training, or preference for alternative methods as reasons for lower usage.

Figure 1.
Frequency of art therapy use among psychologists.



4.3. Target Groups and Application Areas

Respondents most frequently worked with children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and Down syndrome (33.3%), followed by those with emotional and behavioural disorders (30%) and ADHD or learning difficulties (30%). Only 6.7% primarily worked with children with intellectual disabilities.

Table 2.
Types of special educational needs addressed by participants.

What kind of children with SEN do you most often work with?	%
Autism, Down syndrome	33.33%
Emotional and behavioural disorders	30%
Children with intellectual disabilities	6.67%
ADHD, with learning disabilities	30%

This distribution aligns with national statistics indicating increasing diagnoses of ASD and ADHD within Bulgarian educational institutions.

This analysis shows that working with children with SEN requires a wide range of therapeutic methods and professional skills, with psychologists mainly dealing with children with autism, behavioural disorders and ADHD, but also with children with intellectual disabilities. Well-trained professionals are needed to deal with different categories of children with special needs, while providing individualized care and approach.

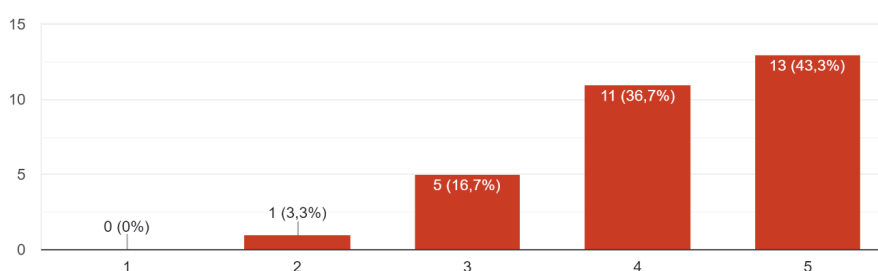
When asked, “How do you rate the overall effectiveness of art therapy in working with children with SEN?” the majority of respondents (80%) rated art therapy as highly effective, yielding a mean score of 4.5. An average effectiveness rating (3) was provided by 16.7% of participants, while 3.3% rated it as only somewhat effective (2). Notably, no respondents indicated that art therapy was completely ineffective. These findings underscore the perceived value of art therapy as an accessible and applicable intervention within professional practice (Figure 2).

4.4. Perceived Effectiveness of Art Therapy

Eighty percent of psychologists rated art therapy as very effective ($M = 4.5$ on a 5-point scale), 16.7% as moderately effective, and only 3.3% as somewhat effective. None of the respondents considered it ineffective.

These results demonstrate a strong consensus regarding the method's therapeutic value. Respondents highlighted improved emotional regulation, attention, and communication among children as key outcomes.

Figure 2.
Perceived effectiveness of art therapy for children with SEN.



4.5. Most Effective Art Therapy Techniques

The most frequently employed and effective techniques were drawing and modelling (70%), followed by music and dance therapy (53.3%), storytelling and bibliotherapy (36.7%), and work with natural materials (33.3%). Sand therapy and theatre-based interventions were used less often but were still recognised as beneficial (23.3% and 13.3%, respectively) (Table 3).

To begin with, drawing and modelling with materials such as plasticine and clay enable children to express emotions and thoughts non-verbally. Within the context of art therapy, such forms of expression serve as powerful tools for self-regulation and emotional support, particularly for children with SEN who may experience communication difficulties.

Furthermore, music and dance therapy were reported as effective by 53.3% of participants. These techniques stimulate motor activity, coordination, and socialisation, while simultaneously providing opportunities for emotional release and stress reduction. As a result, they can be implemented in both group and individual formats, facilitating stronger relationships between children and therapists.

Similarly, storytelling and bibliotherapy (36.7%) were relatively popular among specialists. By engaging with narratives and identifying with characters, children can explore emotional and social challenges, acquire social norms, and discover strategies for addressing internal conflicts.

In addition, art therapy involving wool and other natural materials (33.3%) was acknowledged as useful, though less commonly applied. This technique stimulates sensory perception and supports the development of fine motor skills, making it particularly suitable for children who benefit from tactile stimulation to maintain focus and achieve a state of calm.

Finally, although used less frequently, both sand therapy (23.3%) and theatre-based methods (13.3%) were still identified as effective therapeutic approaches.

Table 3.
Preferred art therapy techniques used with children with SEN.

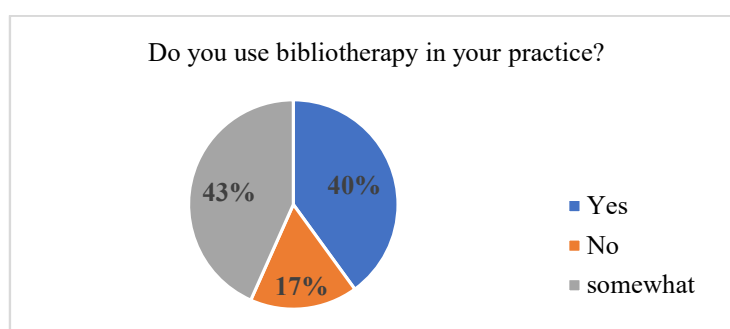
Art therapy techniques	%
Isotherapy with drawing, modeling with plasticine and clay	70.0%
Music and dance therapy	53.3%
Story therapy, bibliotherapy	36.7%
Art therapy with wool and other natural materials	33.3%
Sand therapy	22.3%
Theater	13.3%

The data highlight the diversity in professionals' preferences and the high level of trust in different art therapy methods. These results indicate that psychologists prefer techniques that provide flexibility and are easy to adapt to the different therapeutic needs of children with SEN.

4.6. Bibliotherapy Practices

When asked specifically about bibliotherapy, 40% reported regular use, 43.3% occasional use, and 16.7% non-use. Respondents noted that bibliotherapy helps children identify with literary characters, externalise internal conflicts, and enhance emotional literacy (Figure 3).

Figure 3.
Frequency of bibliotherapy use among psychologists.



4.7. Challenges in Applying Art Therapy

Qualitative analysis identified several recurring challenges as follows:

1. Attention and concentration difficulties – children struggle to sustain engagement during sessions.
2. Behavioural and communication barriers – including impulsivity, aggression, or social withdrawal.
3. Fine motor limitations – affecting children's ability to engage in manual activities.
4. Parental resistance – due to lack of awareness of art therapy's benefits.
5. Insufficient materials and facilities – limited art supplies and inadequate space.
6. Lack of formal training – few opportunities for specialised education in art therapy.

7. Building trust – establishing a stable therapeutic relationship with children with SEN requires extended time and patience.

Respondents frequently mentioned the need for greater parental collaboration and more systemic institutional support.

4.8. Perceived Impact on Children's Development

Most psychologists (80%) rated the impact of art therapy on social skills as high or very high. Reported improvements included emotional stability, confidence, communication, and self-esteem. Several respondents also observed that children became calmer, more expressive, and more engaged after sessions.

4.9. Assessment and Evaluation Strategies

Half of the respondents indicated that they used “other” or informal strategies for assessing progress, such as observation and documentation of children's artistic expressions. Only 16.7% reported systematic behavioural observation and 6.7% used predefined criteria or indicators (Table 4).

Table 4.
Strategies for evaluating progress in art therapy.

Strategies for Art Therapy Progress	%
I use behavioural assessment and observation	16.7%
Keeping in touch with the parent	3.3%
Artistic materials	3.3%
Criteria and indicators	6.7%
Parent rating	3.3%
I'm watching for reactions	6.7%
I don't have any	10%
Other strategies	50%

The absence of standardised assessment frameworks was identified as a major methodological limitation in practice.

4.10. Professional Development and Training Needs

- Respondents highlighted several areas for improvement:
- Access to modern materials and digital tools;
- Training and peer exchange opportunities;
- Collaboration with educators and parents;
- Inclusion of art therapy modules in university psychology programmes.

4.11. National Context and Professional Recommendations

While 90% of psychologists would recommend art therapy to other professionals, only 46.7% believed that art therapy techniques are actively used across Bulgaria. The remaining 53.3% attributed the lack of uptake to insufficient institutional support, limited public awareness, and lack of formal recognition of art therapists as professionals in the national system.

These data indicate a need for wider dissemination of information about art therapy techniques, additional training of specialists, as well as provision of resources for the implementation of these approaches.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirm that art therapy holds a strong position within the professional practice of psychologists working with children with special educational needs (SEN) in Bulgaria. The results align with international evidence that underscores the value of creative therapeutic approaches in fostering emotional, social, and cognitive development (Malchiodi, 2018; Green & Drewes, 2022; Rubin, 2016).

5.1. Interpretation of Findings

The majority of respondents perceived art therapy as very effective, particularly for improving emotional regulation, social interaction, and communication among children. These results support earlier research showing that creative expression facilitates emotional understanding and reduces behavioural challenges in children with ASD and ADHD (Emery, 2004; Green & Drewes, 2022; Jalambadani, 2020; Jianhua & Xiaolu, 2013).

The popularity of techniques such as drawing, modelling, and music therapy suggests that psychologists prefer multimodal interventions that are flexible and accessible within educational environments. These methods allow for adaptation to the sensory and cognitive profiles of diverse learners.

However, despite positive attitudes, significant structural barriers limit broader implementation. The lack of specialised training programmes, absence of formal certification for art therapists, and minimal institutional support create challenges for consistent practice. These obstacles mirror those identified in other Central and Eastern European contexts, where art therapy is often marginalised within mainstream education.

5.2. Systemic and Policy Dimensions

The study highlights the need to embed art therapy within Bulgaria's inclusive education framework. Currently, art-based interventions are rarely included in individual educational plans (IEPs) or school counselling programmes. Strengthening collaboration between psychologists, teachers, and parents could improve both the sustainability and visibility of art therapy in educational settings.

5.3. Ethical and Professional Considerations

Several respondents pointed to ethical concerns, including parental consent, confidentiality, and the sensitivity required when addressing trauma-related experiences through art. As art therapy often deals with deeply personal expression, practitioners must adhere to professional ethical standards similar to those established by BAAT (2025).

The lack of national ethical guidelines specific to art therapy in Bulgaria underscores the importance of developing professional standards that address consent, cultural sensitivity, and safeguarding of personal data, particularly when working with minors.

5.4. The Role of Training and Professional Collaboration

Respondents unanimously emphasised the importance of ongoing professional development. Training in contemporary expressive and trauma-informed approaches can strengthen practitioners' confidence and methodological competence. Collaboration between

universities, ministries, and professional associations could facilitate the introduction of accredited courses in art therapy and creative psychotherapy.

The exchange of experience with international professionals—through workshops, mobility programmes, and joint projects—can further enhance professional capacity and contribute to harmonising Bulgarian practices with European standards.

5.5. Technological Innovations and Future Directions

The emergence of digital art therapy and online creative platforms offers new possibilities for integrating technology into therapeutic work with children. Digital drawing tablets, animation tools, and virtual reality environments can engage digitally oriented learners and support accessibility for those unable to attend face-to-face sessions.

6. CONCLUSION/DISCUSSION

This chapter demonstrates that art therapy represents a promising, effective, and humanistic approach within the field of inclusive education in Bulgaria. The surveyed psychologists view it as a valuable means for fostering emotional expression, concentration, social skills, and confidence among children with SEN.

Nevertheless, the research also exposes systemic barriers that restrict its broader use, including insufficient training opportunities, lack of materials, and minimal institutional recognition. To enhance the role of art therapy in Bulgaria, several recommendations can be made:

- 1. Policy Integration:**

Incorporate art therapy explicitly into inclusive education strategies and funding frameworks.

- 2. Professional Training:**

Develop accredited master's or postgraduate programmes in art therapy, aligned with European standards.

- 3. Research Expansion:**

Encourage interdisciplinary studies combining psychology, pedagogy, and art to establish evidence-based practices.

- 4. Resource Development:**

Provide schools and centres with art materials, safe workspaces, and access to digital tools.

- 5. Public Awareness:**

Increase public and parental understanding of the benefits of art therapy through workshops and media campaigns.

If implemented, these measures could significantly enhance the visibility and impact of art therapy, positioning Bulgaria within the broader international movement toward inclusive and creative education.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study is exploratory and has several limitations. The small sample size ($n = 30$) restricts the generalisability of findings. The reliance on self-reported data may introduce subjectivity, and the absence of standardised instruments limits comparability with international studies.

Future research should expand the sample to include teachers, parents, and students, applying mixed quantitative–qualitative methods such as interviews, longitudinal observations, and intervention-based evaluations. Comparative cross-country studies would also be valuable for situating Bulgarian experiences within the European framework of expressive and therapeutic education.

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