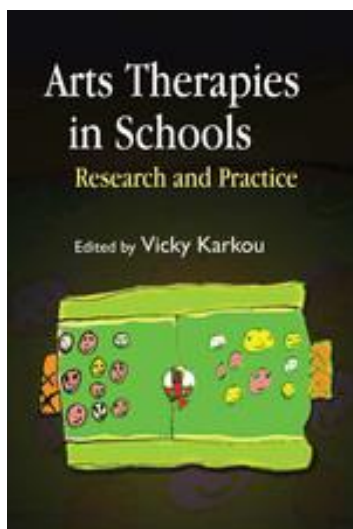


## Book Review

### 'Arts Therapies in Schools - Research and Practice'

Vicky Karkou (Ed) 2010 Jessica Kingsley London Paperback: £24.99

ISBN: 978-1-84310-633-3,



As noted by Vicky Karkou in her Introduction, this UK publication was compiled mainly with view to addressing the gap in contemporary literature concerning evidence-based arts therapies practice in schools. Fifteen case studies are

presented by nineteen practitioners living and working in the UK, USA, Australia, Sri Lanka, Israel, Spain and Norway. The case studies stem from programs which reflect four main arts therapies: visual arts; music; drama; and dance-movement, and span timeframes from between six sessions to three years. They were devised for a range of student populations in mainstream as well as special needs schools and address a variety of client needs related to social and transitional factors, as well as specific learning difficulties. Treatment includes dealing with issues as a result of bullying and school violence; disaffection within the school/ learning system; stress; loss and trauma experienced from natural disasters as well as abuse and neglect; and Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) diagnosis. Each of the case studies introduces the context for the work; provides an informative literature review; sets out a succinct study aim and methodology; details the findings; and concludes with a discussion about the study and implications for further work. In the final chapter Karkou discusses what seem to be the emerging themes and overall trends for arts therapists working in a school-based environment. These are presented in terms of client needs (often varied and multiple); type of work (usually short-term due to limited funding and the need to fit the school calendar); theoretical influences (which have emerged from within each arts discipline); research evidence (derived from in the main qualitative methodologies); and the need for collaboration (including between the arts therapist and arts therapies teams; arts therapies tutors and supervisors; school teachers and school Leadership; and educational psychologists/

counsellors, social workers and other health professionals).

What struck a chord for me with this book is largely treated by Karkou in her Introduction, wherein she discusses firstly the efficacy for arts therapists in schools and secondly the need for arts therapists to be working on, or at least moving towards, practice informed by research.

Drawing on findings from a nationwide survey she conducted in 2006, Karkou notes schools are the second most frequently reported work setting for UK arts therapists, after health services, and that dance-movement therapists and music therapists seem to be more employed than visual arts and drama therapists. Karkou attributes 'specific historical and professional developments' (p.12) to explain these differences between the therapies. In terms of the greater proportion of dance-movement therapists she refers (in part) to the early, seminal work of Laban and the development in British schools of modern educational dance, the style and processes of which she feels has probably helped to establish conducive links to therapeutic dance work. At the time of writing, renewed interest in arts therapies in UK schools is currently being generated, reflecting shifts in health care management and the concomitant development in multi-sector collaborations. Schools are being seen as a likely and appropriate place for early intervention strategies facilitated by arts therapists for children at risk of developing mental health problems (as one example cited).

Once in a school, however, Karkou argues that arts practitioners frequently need to re-assess how they will/can work to fit the setting, which includes meeting the (school) expectation for evidence-based practice usually associated with learning theories, cognitive outcomes and quantitative evidence of targets achieved. Whilst acknowledging the obvious clash with the growing body of knowledge referencing arts-based research practice\*, importantly Karkou emphasises the need for arts therapists 'to engage with what *can* be quantified and *can* be measured' (p.15 editor's italics) about their practice, to make progress with current work conditions and potentially establish new work possibilities within schools. Further, she states: 'despite the evidence that research activity in arts therapies is flourishing, ... completed research studies

regarding work in schools are insufficiently and intermittently documented' (p.15). Such studies could and should inform educational and other arts professionals about therapeutic approaches useful in a school-based environment, and demonstrate how arts therapists address the role of their work in relation to particular school-based policies (p.15). Ultimately the role of arts therapy practitioners in schools needs to be fully promoted to benefit students in need.

So what then is the current situation for arts therapy practitioners in Australian schools? To start, do we know how many arts therapists are currently employed in our schools? Are they working with mainstream or special needs students? Are they also teacher-trained? By what status are our arts therapists employed (full time/ part time/ sessional?), as job status in a school can make a significant difference to the perceived relevance of a program to student learning. What are the day to day conditions in which arts therapists operate? For which school curricula or policies are they responsible? What expectations, if any, have been placed on them in terms of assessment and evaluation? What is offered in the workplace in terms of support, mentoring and supervision?

Do we need to take a survey? I would answer categorically 'Yes', in terms of firstly identifying who it is that we have working in our schools as arts therapists (and in particular dance-movement therapists), in order that they then may be encouraged to work on or towards evidence-based practice.

What I have come to know from my own experience as a dance-movement therapist in a special needs school is that the learning which takes place in my dance space is as legitimate (in terms of student educational outcomes) as that which takes place in the regular classroom, but that this fact is not necessarily shared among my colleagues. In order for the work to be granted legitimacy, I made the decision a while ago that whilst I work in the setting I need to find ways to reflect on my practice and take measures to substantiate it as much as possible, in as many ways as possible, regarding contemporary arts therapies and education literature, curriculum development, and our own school-based teaching and learning policies. In particular I have been attempting to authenticate my practice via small but nevertheless dedicated evidence-based research. I cannot pretend this task is easy and effortless, but I am encouraged by emerging developments at school that the exertion is worth

it. So I extend the challenge to other arts therapists working in school-based practices to respond to the highly demanding, very rewarding and professionally crucial need to corroborate the work that they do in such ways that arts therapies, in particular dance-movement therapy, and education may come to know each other more fully.

**Book reviewed by Sue Mullane,** dance-movement therapy practitioner working part-time in a large, urban special needs school in Melbourne, Australia. See Bio p. 14.

\*See: Wadsworth-Hervey, L. (2000). *Artistic Inquiry in Dance/Movement Therapy- Creative Alternatives for Research*. Illinois, Charles C. Thomas.