

Art Intervention's Role in Emotional Resilience Among Myanmar's Adolescents

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Abstract

This study focuses on the relationship between the impact of art interventions on the emotional wellbeing of Grade 9 and 10 students living in conflicted-affected areas of Myanmar. The study employs a quantitative experimental methodology to examine emotions visually through students' drawings following the 2021 military coup that has affected every aspect of everyday life, including interruption to education leading to alienation for adolescents and a dramatic increase in youth mental health issues. The research investigates the impact of structured art sessions, including both free and guided drawing, on the emotional well-being of students who have experienced a prolonged period of conflict. According to the results, structured art sessions showed a clear pattern of art's therapeutic effects on students in conflict settings, including increased happiness and decreased sadness and worry.

Keywords: Drawing Intervention, Emotional Well-being, Adolescents, Military Coup, Conflict Area

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Introduction

This study is based in conflict-affected areas of Myanmar after the 2021 military coup to explore the short-term therapeutic benefits of drawing interventions on emotional expression of adolescents, i.e., Grade 9 and 10 students studying in conflict zones. Art interventions are becoming common strategies for addressing the emotional challenges that adolescents encounter during periods of hardship and conflict (Buriel et al., 2019; Gatta et al., 2014; Feen-Calligan et al., 2020). Given the existing literature on the therapeutic benefits of art intervention for adolescents in the midst of difficulty and conflict, the study's primary goal is to expand our understanding of the benefits of engaging in art interventions for this student population, largely affected by the conflict and psychological implications brought on by educational disruption. The research shows how conflict and educational disruption affect students' mental health. The study aims to contribute to the current understanding of the therapeutic impact of art interventions for students' psychological growth and well-being by focusing on this specific critical time in the crucial phase of adolescent development (Boulton, 2000; Eisenberg et al., 1993) as this is an especially vulnerable period in their lives. The personal involvement of the researcher with existing educational outreach efforts in the region further personalises this study and enhances understanding of the urgency and significance of the research in contributing to student well-being and resilience.

Literature Review

Art interventions are gaining popularity as useful therapeutic tools in the treatment of emotional well-being among adolescents affected by different forms of conflicts and adversities (Whitenburg, 2020; Gatta et al., 2014; Feen-Calligan et al., 2020; Buriel et al., 2019; Buser et al., 2023; Quinlan et al., 2016; Spier, 2010; Nicolas, 2023; Ramirez et al., 2020; Harpazi et al., 2020; Easwaran et al., 2021). This literature review aims to synthesize evidence from various studies and help to answer the main question: what therapeutic benefits does art intervention have on emotional expression, from adolescents in areas of conflict?

According to Buriel et al. (2019), there is a critical impact that armed conflict has on education, and over 125 million children and adolescents in conflict-affected countries need urgent support for their education. They highlight potential therapeutic benefits that this artistic intervention might have had in camps in their study, which focuses on the Middle East. In a rehabilitation setting, Gatta et al. (2014) investigated the efficacy of art intervention for adolescents with personality disorders. According to their findings, it was revealed the positive effects of art intervention on emotional well-being through non-verbal, sensual, and kinesthetic ways of engaging. According a study on 12-week art therapy program conducted by Feen-Calligan et al. (2020) with Syrian refugee youth living in the United States. Their findings prove that participation in art therapy programs significantly reduced the level of stress and trauma-related psychopathology. This indicates that art therapy can be used to enhance coping strategies and overall well-being. Buser et al. (2023) state that engaging in art activities can have a significant positive impact on mental health and general well-being of children impacted by the conflict in Kashmir. Their work demonstrates art-based school interventions as an effective method of promoting emotional expression and empowerment.

As eighth-grade students transferred to high school, Spier (2010) assessed the efficacy of group art therapy in a classroom setting. The results showed that this program was effective in increasing self-care and reducing disruptive behaviors.

Ramirez et al. (2020) conducted a study to evaluate the effects of group art therapy on adolescent boys of color who were exposed to poverty. The research's findings showed a considerable improvement in social and emotional challenges, with the "At-Risk" category of students showing the most notable improvement.

Harpazi et al. (2020) investigated the perceptions of school-based art interventions among adolescent clients and emphasized the advantages of establishing a secure environment. Nicolas (2023) conducted a review of the impact of school-based art interventions on the development of depressed adolescents. According to his study, this intervention has the potential to substantially improve overall well-being as well as it reduces depression.

According to a participatory insight analysis, conducted by Easwaran et al. (2021), on the engagement of youth with depression and anxiety in the arts. Their study revealed the importance of youth-led methods in recognizing the direct impact of the arts on mental health.

The literature review reveals a substantial number of studies that illustrate the effects of art therapeutic interventions on adolescents who have experienced conflict. Although many studies have demonstrated the advantages of art interventions, there is a gap on the study of immediate, short-term effects on emotional expressions students in the age of adolescent in conflict situations. Moreover, the existing literature does not properly examine how art interventions could be tailored in conflict settings like in Myanmar. This stud, by evaluating the immediate impact of drawing interventions on the emotional well-being of adolescents, i.e., grade 9 and 10 students from conflict-affected Myanmar, aims to fill these gaps in the literature. It aims to gain not only insight into the practical application of drawing interventions in conflict-affected educational environments but also its potential to enhance emotional resilience and expression.

Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to examine the therapeutic effects of drawing interventions on the expression of emotions among Grade 9 and 10 students in both conflict-affected regions of Myanmar. In this quantitative experimental research design, the emotional well-being of students who are experiencing adversity due to conflicts in post-coup Myanmar is examined in relation to the efficacy of drawing interventions. The objective is to provide valuable insights into the potential benefits of art interventions for adolescents in such environments.

Research Design

This study employs a quantitative research design to assess the therapeutic effect of drawing interventions on the emotional well-being of Grade 9 and 10 students in the conflict areas of Myanmar. Surveys are the primary data collection method, measuring changes in emotional states before and after drawing sessions. The study compares two groups: one engaging in free drawing and the other in guided drawing.

Method

- **Participants:** The participants are students from two schools in the conflict-affected areas of Pekon Township, Myanmar, consisting of both IDP and local village residents.

Purposive sampling ensures that the sample consists of diversity in both demographics and extent of the impact of conflicts.

- **Ethical Considerations:** The protocol was approved by the University of Massachusetts Lowell's Institutional Review Board with IRB number: 24-040. Consent was obtained for participants from all age groups, and in the case of those below the age of majority, assent was secured with an additional requirement of consent from their guardian(s). The process of consent outlined the purpose, procedures, the voluntary nature, and ways in which data would be protected.
- **Interventions:** The first experimental group of students in one school engaged in free drawing sessions without specific guidance, whereas the group of students from the other school engaged in guided drawing sessions included prompts to illustrate specific emotions or messages. Pre- and post-surveys captured participants' emotional states.
- **Survey Measures:** The pre-survey recorded demographic information and baseline measures of emotional well-being; the post-survey measured happiness, sadness, anxiety, and overall emotional well-being.
- **Data Collection and Analysis:** Surveys of emotional states, including reports of happiness, sadness, worry, and overall emotional feelings, were used for data collection and analysis both before and after the intervention. To determine the efficacy of the art intervention in changing emotional expressions, an analysis was conducted to compare the changes in these emotions before and after the art sessions.

Findings

Enhanced Student Happiness Through Art Intervention

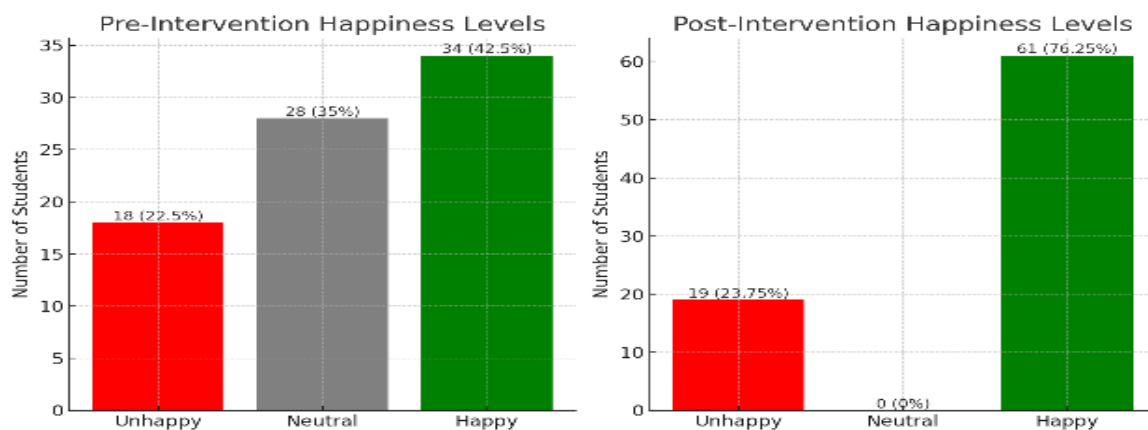


Figure 1: Improvement in Student Happiness Levels Post-Intervention

Student happiness levels were significantly improved from 42.5 % to 76.25 % by the drawing intervention, with a decline in neutral students from 35 % to zero. Although unhappiness increased slightly from 22.5 % to 23.75 %, generally data recorded a positive effect of the intervention on student happiness.

Reduction in Student Sadness After Art Intervention

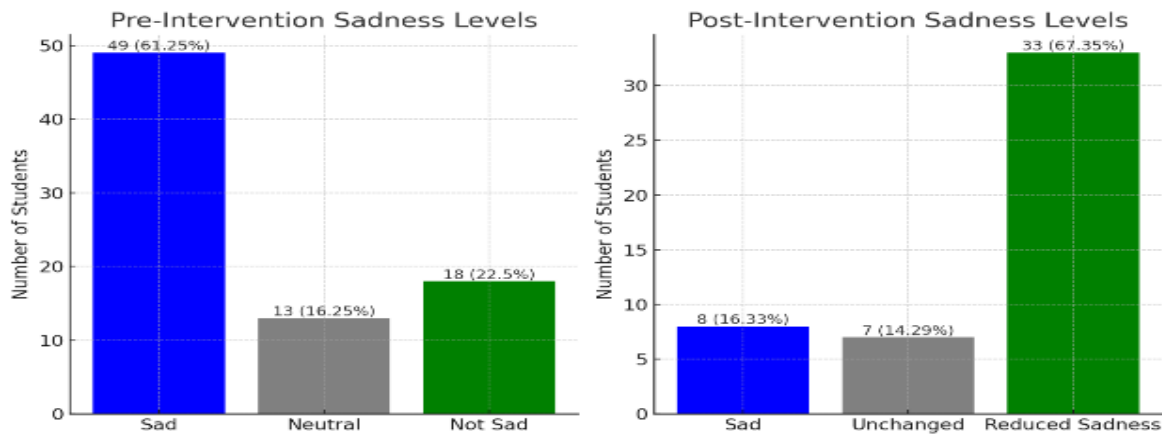


Figure 2: Reduction in Student Sadness Levels After Art Intervention

Prior to the intervention, 61.25% of the students reported experiencing feelings of sadness, while 16.25% were neutral and 22.5% did not have any feelings of sadness. Following the drawing intervention, only 16.33% of the students continued to experience sadness, while 67.35% reported feeling less sad. The emotions remained unchanged in 14.29% of the participants. The data suggests that the drawing intervention appeared to reduce the feelings of sadness for the majority of the students, although this was not applicable for all.

Decrease in Student Worries Post-intervention

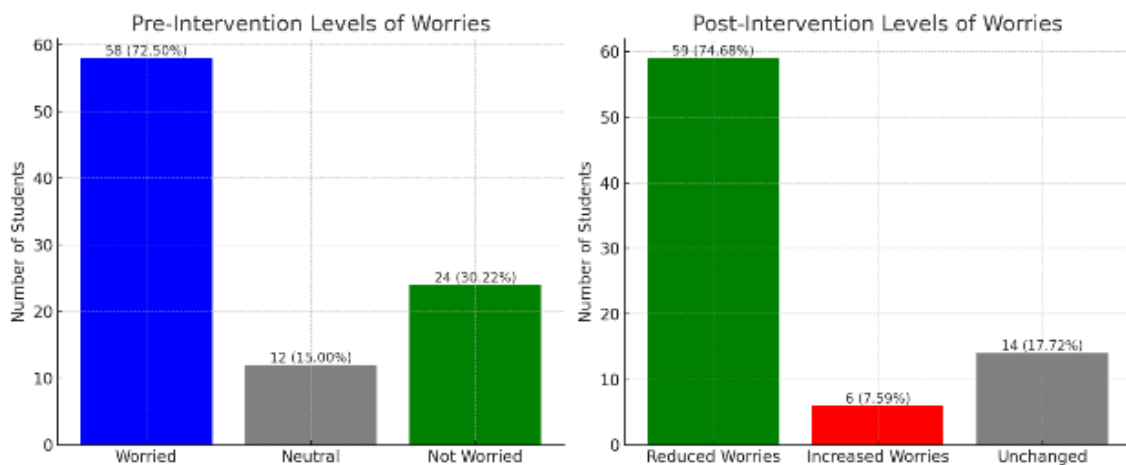


Figure 3: Decrease in Student Worries Post-Intervention

In the baseline data before intervention, 72.5% of students expressed worries, 15% expressed neutrality, and 30.22% expressed a lack of worry. After engaging in drawing intervention, 74.68% of students reported feeling less worried, 7.59% reported feeling more worried, and 17.72% said there had been no change. This indicates that the drawing intervention was highly effective in relieving the worries of the majority of the students, thereby enhancing their mental health.

Improved Mental Peace Among Students Following Art Sessions

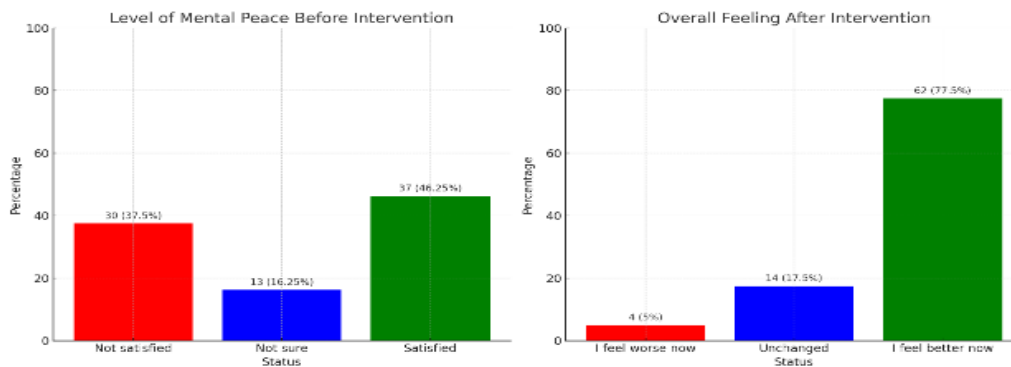


Figure 4: Improved Mental Well-being Among Students After Drawing Sessions

Prior to the intervention, 37.5% of students expressed dissatisfaction with their mental well-being, 16.25% were uncertain, and 46.25% were content. After the intervention, only 5% of individuals reported feeling worse, 17.5% remained unchanged, and 77.5% reported feeling better. Based on the data, it is evident that the drawing intervention had a substantial positive effect on the students' overall emotions and resulted in a substantial increase in their mental well-being.

Comparative Insights Into Artistic Expressions



Figure 5: Example Drawing by a Free Drawing Group Student Showing a Tranquil Landscape



Figure 6: Example Drawing by a Guided Drawing Student, Showing a Village Under Attack With Helicopters, Burning Houses, and Fleeing Residents, With a Note Saying, 'If We Cannot Go Back and Harvest, What Are We Going to Eat'

Drawings from the two groups differ noticeably. Free Drawing Group drawings frequently feature serene mountain and plant landscapes that convey serenity. Others convey feelings of solitude or introspection using a single figure or minimal color. In contrast, the Guided Drawing Group's artwork was conflict-centered and the use of strong words within their drawings to express a desire for peace and the challenges of conflict. Phrases like *"I am not happy these days, missing home and wanna stay with all the family members, where is peace,"* and *"Now I learn that life is such a hard thing,"* explain the depth of the yearning and the chaos of reality. Their worries about the future are portrayed in other sentences, like *"What are we to eat if we can't go back to the village and harvest?"* and *"Way back to home wishing a pleasant morning,"* which express the wish for things to return to normal. Hope is expressed in a situation of adversity through positive statements such as *"I desire peace and freedom from fear"* and *"Let us remain resilient until the end."* These variations imply that the guided drawing approach may encourage students to confront and communicate their experiences more openly, highlighting the effectiveness of drawing intervention as a medium for young people to communicate difficult feelings in conflict-settings.

Discussion on Art Intervention Outcomes

This study confirms that the happiness level of students significantly increased following the interventions, which is consistent with the research conducted by Buriel et al. (2019) and Feen-Calligan et al. (2020). This increase in happiness thereby provides additional evidence to the broader literature on the positive emotions that art causes in conflict-affected youth and more solidifies drawing intervention for emotional well-being within educational settings.

Art interventions have been shown to reduce negative emotions in adolescents, as demonstrated by Gatta et al. (2014), and this study's findings on reduced sadness align with their results. Nicolas (2023) reviewed school-based art interventions and found that they improve well-being and reduce depression. This study builds on that by showing how effective these interventions are in conflict areas, reducing sadness and improving emotional resilience.

The significant improvements in total mental peace and emotional stability found among students after post-intervention are consistent with findings from other studies, including Buser et al. (2023), and Harpazi et al. (2020). These findings underline the realization that art interventions tend toward rendering a sense of inner peace and emotional equilibrium crucial for adolescents navigating challenges of conflict and displacement.

Conclusion

In summary, this study contributes important empirical support for the integration of art-based interventions in educational programs processed for emotional experiences of students to work toward mental well-being. Contributing specific evidence to concrete literature on the therapeutic and healing effects of art in a particular context, this study also contributes more generally to educational and psychological frameworks attuned to fulfill key dimensions in the emotional development of adolescents in a very critical period of their lives.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

I declare the use of Grammarly and Quillbot, AI tools, for paraphrasing, grammar and writing assistance, which helped improve the clarity and readability of this manuscript.

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