

A Study
of Time Limited Serial Drawing
as a Non Verbal Counselling Approach
with Immigrant Children
of Non English Speaking Backgrounds

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*From the CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD
(Adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations,
November 20, 1989)*

THE STATES PARTIES TO THE PRESENT CONVENTION

... Taking due account of the importance of the traditions and cultural values of each people for the protection and harmonious development of the child,

... Have agreed as follows:

ARTICLE 39

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to promote physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of a child victim of: any form of neglect, exploitation, or abuse; torture or any other form of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; or armed conflicts. Such recovery and reintegration shall take place in an environment which fosters the health, self respect and dignity of the child.

ABSTRACT

Primary school aged immigrant NESB children attending an introductory English centre were referred by teachers to the school counsellor when behavioural and learning problems (including PTSD symptoms) had persisted for more than six months.

Five cases were included in the study; four children were refugees or from a war zone and one was accompanying parents temporarily studying in Australia. These children were all assessed as having experienced some degree of traumatisation linked to pre-migration, migration and post migration experiences which included profound change, loss and grief, extreme stress and trauma, and disruption of attachments.

Because of their limited ability to express issues verbally, a non language dependent counselling approach known as serial drawing (Allan, 1988) was used. This involved the child drawing each week in the presence of the counsellor for a contracted number of sessions (6).

The study examined the efficacy of this approach with these children by 1) examining whether each child's drawings followed a series of stages predicted by Allan (1988) reflecting their processing of troubling issues as well as their relationship with the helper and 2) observing behaviour change following serial drawing using repeat Teacher Report Form (Achenbach, 1991) ratings.

Results indicated that all children were able to symbolically express troubling issues, but only those who currently felt safe (both physically and psychologically) were able to process and resolve their issues through serial drawing. Behaviour and learning showed positive change and a reduction in PTSD symptoms in the three cases whose drawings followed stages reflecting healing and therapeutic engagement with the counsellor. The other two cases showed continuing behaviour and learning problems, including PTSD symptoms.

The study concluded that time limited serial drawing could be a useful assessment as well as therapeutic approach with children unable to articulate troubling issues, but that healing may depend on other preconditions such as trauma being past and the child being able to form a therapeutic relationship in a short time. Continuing attachment problems may hinder recovery.

PREFACE

Inspiration for this study has come from the work of Dr John Allan, Ruth Wraith and Magne Raundalen, who have all shown how challenging, humbling and enriching engaging with troubled children can be. I also owe thanks to Margaret Gardiner, who first introduced me to serial drawing.

I would like to acknowledge the support and assistance of many people without whom this study could not have been completed.

For guidance and encouragement throughout the whole process, my thanks go to my supervisor Dr Sandi Plummer. Her clear thinking and insightful feedback was invaluable both in keeping me on track and challenging me to fully explore what was contained in the data.

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Permission to conduct the study in a school setting was given by the ACT Department of Education and Training. Cooperation and encouragement of the school principal, Margaret Hird and senior IEC teachers, Grette Toner, Di Bruce and Carol Morgan were essential, and readily given, for which I am very appreciative.

To all the children and parents who agreed to participate in the research, I express my gratitude. Without their involvement there would have been no study. Thanks also go to all the teachers who participated in the research, and provided the TRF ratings of the children's behaviour.

Finally, I owe my whole family a debt of gratitude for their practical help, encouragement, and forbearance over the last two and a half years. Special thanks go to my husband, Mark, for his support in countless ways, and to my mother, Joy, for proof reading the final draft.

I dedicate this work to my children, Christopher and Louisa, and to children everywhere. May they always find support to deal with life's difficult experiences and may we as adults always be listening for what cannot be said.

Anna Huber

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